

AUGUST 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

Damascus-Tehran

Damascus and Tehran reach a new credit line agreement, ensuring a regular flow of 2 million barrels of oil per month into Syria. This is expected to stabilize the local market, which saw prices rise because of supply delays. The agreement, along with continuing economic cooperation electricity and railways, comes despite US sanctions.

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Regional updates

No Saudi diplomatic mission to Damascus

Saudi Arabia fails to appoint an ambassador to Syria, and has put a stop to the restoration of its embassy in Damascus. It is unclear whether this is a permanent measure, and whether normalization efforts between Saudi Arabia and the Syrian government have faltered. There are also rumors of tension between Riyadh and Tehran over a dispute over the Dorra gas field, which is divided between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran.

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Humanitarian updates

Bab Al-Salama and Ar-Rai crossings

The Syrian government extends permission for the UN to deliver humanitarian aid to opposition-held areas in the north-west through Bab Al-Salama and Ar-Rai crossings with Turkey for three months, until November 13, 2023.

09



Economy and markets

Central Bank sets new remittance rate

The Syrian Central Bank sets the Syrian pound's international monetary exchange rate (used for remittances) at SYP 10,100 per USD, up from SYP 9,900 on 18 July. The Central Bank's decision comes after the black market exchange rate dropped to SYP 13,400 per USD.

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Conflict and security

ISIS attacks Syrian army buses

Moezleh, Deir-ez-Zor; ISIS claims responsibility for an attack on two Syrian army military buses in the Syrian Badia. ISIS reported 40 soldiers killed (although Russian media sources reported 20 dead, and other media 23) and 10 others wounded in the attack. The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the US of orchestrating these attacks in coordination with ISIS - this is highly unlikely. The government's Military Police arrested a number of military and security personnel who were on duty during the attack.

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Services

Expanded baby unit opened in Arrahma

Jsir-Ash-Shugur district, Darkosh subdistrict, Darkosh: The Idleb Health Directorate, Physicians Across Continents Turkey and Arrahma Hospital management open the newly expanded pediatric and neonatal department in the hospital, funded with the support of UNICEF and Physicians Across Continents.

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Social instability

Anti-government demonstrations

Dozens of demonstrations are held against the Syrian government throughout government-controlled areas of As-Sweida, Dar'a, Idleb, Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, and Deir-ez-Zor. They call for the removal of the Syrian government, in support of protestors in As-Sweida, who staged mass demonstrations earlier in August.

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Economy and markets

Bread shortages in Deir-ez-Zor

Deliveries of flour are interrupted by security instability caused by clashes between the Deir-ez-Zor Military Council and the SDF, meaning no bread in bakeries in northern and eastern Deir-ez-Zor, from Hajin to Baghouz.

Summary

The Arab League's Ministerial Liaison Committee meeting in Cairo on 15 August ended with an acknowledgment of the Syrian government's efforts towards normalization in the region, combating the narcotics trade and facilitating refugee returns. However, actual results remain uncertain. Claims of Damascus assisting the UN with returns remain unsubstantiated, and cooperation with Jordan against the narcotics trade is minimal. Bashar al-Assad has also shown little interest in discussions with opposition to find a political solution to the conflict.

In south and central Syria, protests erupted in As-Sweida on 17 August following the government's increase of fuel prices by up to 167%. The protests spread across the governorate, to Dar'a, opposition-held Idleb and Aleppo and Autonomous Administration-held Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa. Damascus' options for a resolution are few. There were shortages of medicines in pharmacies across government-held areas, with depreciation pushing up production costs, and production facilities unable to remain profitable – the Ministry of Health has increased the selling price, but according to pharmacies, this remains insufficient to curb losses.

In northeast Syria, clashes between Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) following the arrest of Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC) commander, Abu Khawla, on 27 August, are becoming a serious security threat. The clashes have inflamed divisive political rhetoric, and attempts at mediation (with the support of the US) have so far failed. Separately, tribes have come out in support of Sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Muslat from al-Jabour tribe, who was assaulted by a commander of the government-affiliated National Defense Force in Al-Hasakeh. It is unclear whether commander Abdul Qadir Hamo has stepped down, as was demanded by tribal leaders, however tensions have quietened. The co-chair of the Autonomous Administration's Directorate of Water in Al-Hasakeh announced a state of emergency amid severe water shortages. He blamed Turkey's "systematic" policy of cutting off water from the Alouk water station. People from neighboring governorates have raised money and sent water, while the Administration, not for the first time, announced a planned \$18 million water wells project to feed the city with water.

In northwest Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) arrested more individuals accused of affiliation with foreign actors and local rivals. The most high-profile arrest was of HTS co-founder and deputy leader, Abu Maria al-Qahtani. Qahtani was HTS leader Abu Mahmoud al-Jolani's right-hand man, and was involved in various levels of HTS finances and diplomacy. In July, Green Energy introduced a policy of buying surplus electricity from privately owned solar farms in Idleb and western Aleppo. The popular initiative has been curtailed however, with the Syrian Salvation Government introducing debilitating red tape, rumored to be to restrict the market and benefit its supporters. In more energy news, protesters in northern Aleppo were angered by further price increases to their electricity bills. AK Energy justified the decision by pointing to depreciation of the lira, saying dollar prices remain the same. Local councils are tasked with finding a solution, but their powers are limited by the company's monopoly over the area.

Summary

Economic indicators

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Limited progress shown as normalization efforts continue

South and Central Syria

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Northeast Syria

SDF-DMC agreements fails, hostilities resume

NDF clashes with Al-Jabour tribe in Al-Hasakeh

Upstream battle to find solutions to water shortages in Al-Hasakeh

Northwest Syria

HTS arrests deputy leader Qahtani

Popular Green Energy initiative buys electricity from small-scale solar farms

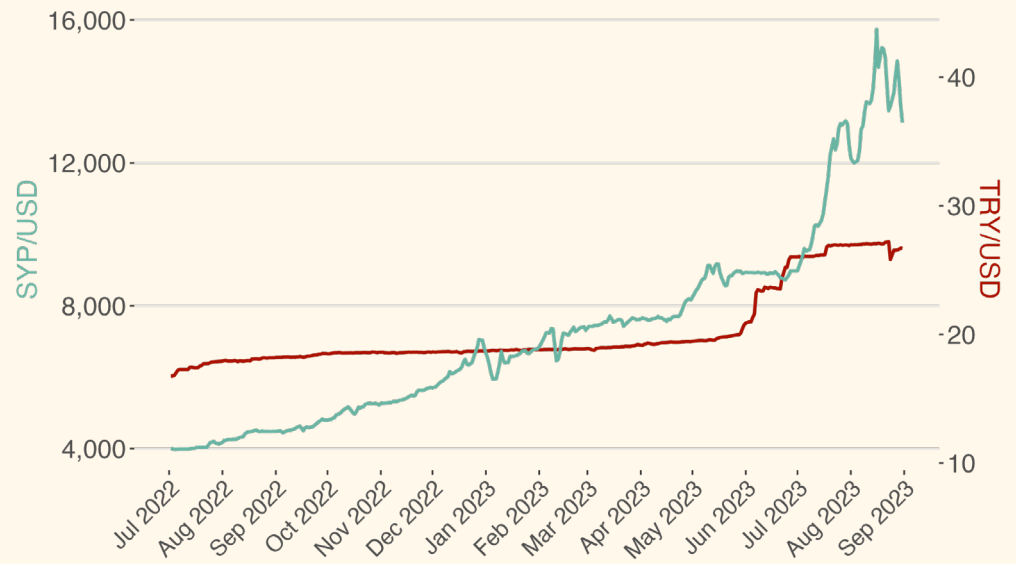
AK Energy in Aleppo raises electricity prices, sparking protest

Economic indicators

	June 2023	July 2023	August 2023
SYP/USD official exchange rate	3,000	3,000	8,585.0
SYP/USD parallel market rate	8,903 (0.9%)	10,042 (12.8%)	13,748.3 (24.4%)
TRY/USD official rate	23.7 (20%)	26.2 (10.4%)	26.9 (1.7%)

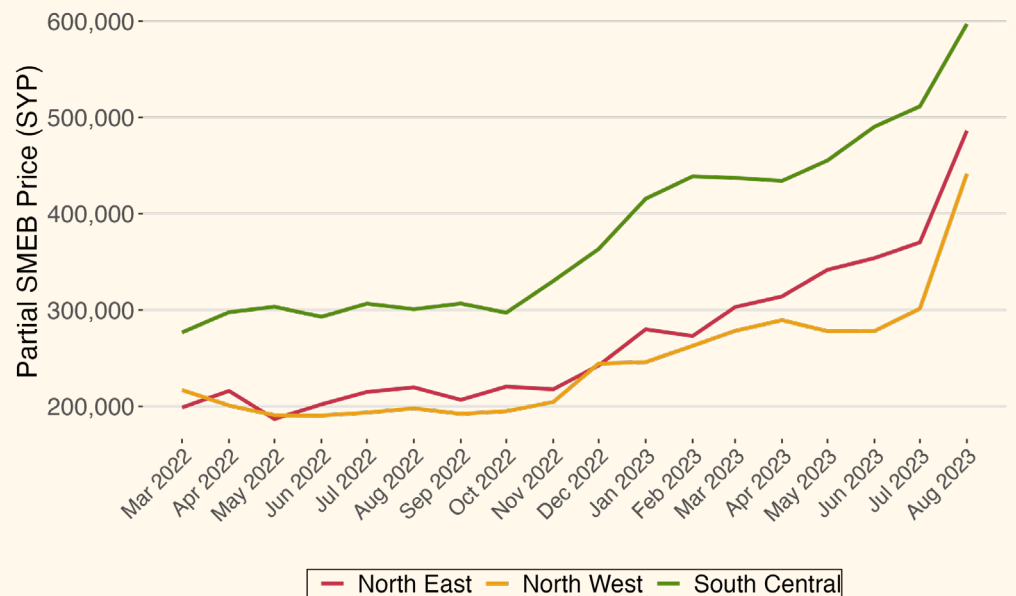
Economic indicator 1.

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



Economic indicator 2.

SYP/USD and TRY/USD, exchange rates



Economic indicator 3.

Change in partial SMEB price by zone of control.

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

International

Limited progress shown as normalization efforts continue

On 15 August, the Arab League's Ministerial Liaison Committee [met](#) in Cairo. The closing remarks of the meeting showed the Committee [acknowledged](#) the steps taken by the Syrian government's efforts towards normalization in the region and welcomed the steps the government has taken bilaterally with Jordan¹ and Iraq² to combat narcotics smuggling. During the meeting, Syrian foreign minister Faisal Mekdad [briefed the participants about the measures taken by the Syrian government](#) to facilitate refugee returns such as cooperating with the UNHCR, and facilitating the establishment of UNHCR offices in areas where refugees could return. Mekdad also said that the government will be providing data on the number of returns and it is keen to continue the UNHCR's constructive involvement in issues around refugee returns. Finally, Committee participants [agreed to resume](#) the Constitutional Committee meetings [in Oman](#), set up by the UN as part of the Syrian peace process to reconcile Damascus with opposition actors by renewing the Syrian Constitution.

Despite the sense of progress noted in the Committee's closing remarks, media reports published throughout August indicate that progress on these various issues remains limited. For instance, on bilateral efforts to combat narcotics, Jordanian media sources [said](#) that the Syria–Jordan joint security meetings to combat narcotics trafficking have not yielded significant results; for example, the Syrian government has not abided by Jordan's request to take action against four notorious narcotics dealers who continue operating at the border unimpeded. Similarly, the measures put forward by the Syrian government to facilitate durable refugee returns outlined above could not be substantiated by UNHCR. And finally, there is doubt whether or not the Syrian government will participate in the peace process (through the Constitutional Committee) in good faith, or with any intention of sharing power. For years, the Syrian government has been accused of [purposefully obstructing](#) any negotiations and talks it participates in, causing more delays. The government participated in twenty rounds of talks in Astana, nine in Geneva, and eight Constitutional Committee meetings, none of which progressed into any plan for action.

The lack of initiative on the part of the Syrian government to move forward with normalization was also mirrored in key messages delivered by its president, Bashar Al-Assad. During a rare [30-minute interview](#) with Sky News on 9 August, Assad's responses gave reason to doubt his commitment to the Amman declaration (which provides a roadmap for regional normalization and an end to the

1 For example, the joint Jordanian-Syrian committee for combating drug trafficking held its [first meeting](#) on 23 July to identify the actors responsible for trafficking operations and discuss the necessary measures to stop them.

2 The Syrian and Iraqi government conducted a [joint operation](#) to dismantle a global network trafficking drugs into Iraq.

conflict).³ For example, when asked if he thought of stepping down, Assad replied he would “only step down when the people asked him to and not when the country is facing an external threat.”

He dismissed the 2011 protests, saying that “the protests at their apex did not exceed 100,000 people in all governorates when compared to the millions of people supporting the government.”

The president also denied the government’s involvement in the drug trade saying that “Syria has shown that it is eager to help fight the drug trade” and that “it is natural for it to flourish when the government is weakened.”

Assad also highlighted that the “dire livelihood situation given that electricity, water, health infrastructure, and schools are unavailable” as the main reason why refugees were not returning and blamed “terrorist groups” for “killing and displacing civilians.”

The Syrian president’s remarks towards bilateral Arab cooperation also hinted at, possibly, his pessimistic views towards normalization. Assad described Syria’s bilateral relationship with Arab countries as being “formal in nature” and “weak” because “the relationship is not based on institutions.” Assad also noted that Arab cooperation is unable to produce actionable ideas, “saying that as long as there are no solutions for the problems, the relationship will remain formal.”

In reality, the once ‘promising’ road to normalization presented by media outlets since Syria was readmitted into the Arab League now appears far-fetched. Cooperation seems limited to meetings between foreign ministers without concrete action plans while government pledges are either unverifiable, or its achievements inflated.

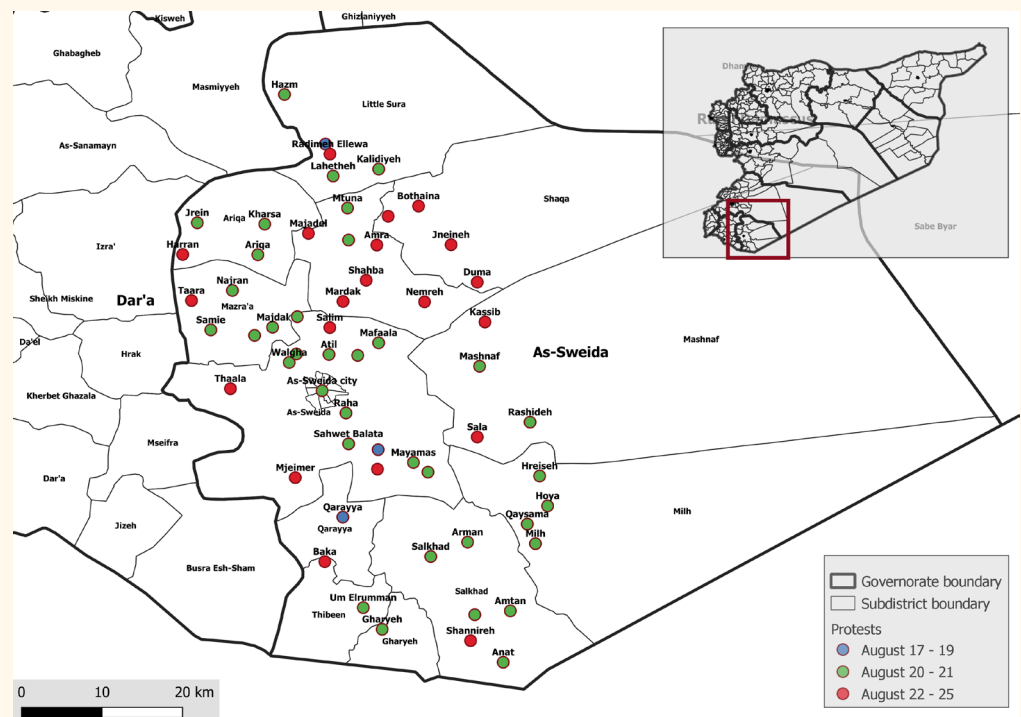
³ The Amman declaration was published following the [Amman summit](#) held on 1 May. The summit was attended by the foreign ministers of Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, and was a continuation of consultative meetings around the Syrian crisis and discussions of details of previous calls held between the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan with the Syrian government. The summit took place after Crown Prince Mohamad Bin Salman [called for an “Arab leadership role” in solving the Syrian crisis](#) during a meeting held in Jeddah on 14 April to discuss Syria’s return to the Arab League.

South and Central Syria

Anti-government protests spread country-wide

Protests began in As-Sweida on 17 August in three different locations before engulfing the entire governorate and spreading to other locations both inside and outside government-held areas. The protests began following the Syrian Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection’s decision to [increase](#) diesel prices and remove petrol subsidies for residents, public services, and industries by up to 167%, resulting in [uncertainty on how food and vegetable items would be priced](#) in local markets.

The ministry’s decision is likely to impact service provision, the cost of production, and cost of transportation, most (if not all) of which is passed onto consumers. Economic expert Amer Shahda said that the decision will lead to further inflation and a [price increase of 360 different items](#) in the market. In an attempt to mitigate fuel price increases, the government announced a [100% salary increase for government civilian and military employees](#) to alleviate the decrease in household purchasing power. However, Shahda went on to say [that](#) the salary increase would be unlikely to increase consumer purchasing power significantly and would likely only contribute to price inflation by adding upward pressure to prices.⁴



Protests spreading throughout As-Sweida (Source: CA-SYR)

4 Decrees 11/2023 and 12/2023 increased salaries and pensions of government civilian and military employees by 100%.

Protests started in As-Sweida with frustration at the government's economic mismanagement and [continued adoption of damaging economic policies in more than 50 different locations](#) across the governorate (shown above). The As-Sweida protests later spread to other governorates and evolved into a nationwide generalized anti-government protest – encompassing cross-line solidarity – on 25 August, [spanning](#) opposition-held Idleb and Aleppo, Autonomous Administration-held Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa, and government-held As-Sweida, and Dar'a. Protestors in As-Sweida city carried the Syrian revolution flag, protestors in Atareb carried the Druze flag, and protestors in various locations chanted “the Syrian people are one.” Anti-government chants personally insulted Assad and rejected Baath party rule.⁵ In As-Sweida, in which an already fractious relationship with the government exists, these protests could cause further animosity between residents and Damascus. As the protests reached their 19th day, uncertainty has swelled as to what will happen next. The protesters have demanded the resignation of Assad, and the implementation of UN Resolution 2254 which calls for a peaceful political solution to the conflict. These demands are unlikely to be met.



PH: Abobaker alsaka



Protests held on 25 August in southern, northwest, and northeast Syria (Clockwise starting from the top left, [Azaz](#), [Busra Esh-Sham](#), [Dar'a al-Balad](#), [As-Sweida city](#)).

⁵ Protestors and held up caricatures that insult Assad and defaced billboards and government buildings. Protestors also [forcibly closed Baath party offices](#), [blaming it](#) for many of the crises that the country has gone through over the past several decades.

As-Sweida society unified behind the Arab groups

The protests in As-Sweida were supported by the Druze and Bedouin communities; this could make it more difficult for the government to sow division within the governorate. Religious and community leaders (Sheikhs Hikmat al-Hijri, Youssef Jarbou', and Hammoud Hinnawi) openly supported [the protests](#); Al-Hijri was later declared leader of the protests. [The Bedouin tribes of As-Sweida](#) and [the governorate's prominent families](#), declared their support for Al-Hijri, as did Qouwat Sheikh al-Karam and Harakat Rijal al-Karama (HRK), the governorate's two biggest militias. The widespread demonstrations have also been well organized, with different actors assigned specific tasks. For example, Sheikh al-Hijri is liaising with government employees to enable resumption of their work, while members of HRK are participating in leading and protecting the protestors.

Disparate response localized and non-committal

The Syrian government's response differed depending on location. In Lattakia, Tartous, Aleppo, and Rural Damascus, arrests were swift, and targeted against people distributing anti-government leaflets, spray-painting anti-government slogans, and participating in evening protests.⁶ The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported [57 arrests, including 11 women](#). Local activists [Ayman Fares](#) from Tartous and [Ahmad Ismail](#) from Lattakia were arrested by security forces for posting anti-government content on social media, criticizing the government and Assad.

In Dar'a governorate, government forces [clashed](#) with protestors in Nawa who attempted to block roads, the city was shelled and reinforcements were deployed close by. Besides this incident, protests in Dar'a were largely unimpeded, potentially because many were held in the evening out of fear of retribution by security forces.⁷

In As-Sweida, the government attempted to negotiate with the protestors; As-Sweida governor, Bassem Barsik, [met](#) with the de-facto protest leader, Sheikh al-Hijri, to find a solution. However, the meeting ended in failure, with Al-Hijri refusing to compromise on the protestors' demands. Barsik has said that the government does not intend to use force, and that residents' demands "are very important for the leadership."

⁶ Public anger grew in July when activists in Lattakia and Tartous openly [criticized the government's economic mismanagement](#), later developing into [personal criticism of Assad](#), and later [openly challenging both the president and first lady](#). The August 10th movement [emerged on social media on 5 August](#) describing itself as an [unarmed and peaceful protest movement](#) with members across government-held areas. The movement's Facebook page would later post videos of its members in [As-Sweida](#), [Lattakia](#), [Aleppo](#), [Rural Damascus](#), and [Masyaf](#) distributing anti-government leaflets. Other localized movements later surfaced such as the [March 18 movement for change](#) in Dar'a. They operated online, spray-painted anti-government slogans and distributed leaflets.

⁷ Protests in Dar'a took place in the evening because of the potentially reduced security presence and because it is easier for them to hide their identity.

In further action against the dissent, the government is utilizing its affiliated media channels to discredit the protests; some [focused](#) on the disruption caused to workers and students (however local sources claimed only Baath party officials and non-essential government workers were impeded). Pro-government journalist, Rafik Latf, [referred](#) to As-Sweida protestors as “agents, part of an American and Zionist plot to attack Syria.” Luna Shibl, Assad’s former media officer, [implied](#) that the current events in As-Sweida were “part of an old British plan” that included “granting autonomy to As-Sweida and Dar’a.” A pro-government business owner, Wassim al-Assad, called for a pro-government rally in Tartous in response to the As-Sweida protests, however, [only 200 people reportedly showed up](#).

Damascus ignores protestors, for now.

As it stands, Assad and his government are choosing to ignore the protests, instead [giving local officials the opportunity to resolve the matter](#). It is unclear, should the protests escalate further, or begin to impede government work, how Damascus will react – previous actions provide potential insight.

As in 2011, the government could choose to use brute force to suppress the protests, although the risk of a backlash may be too high. The protests have received significant attention from national and international media, meaning that any hostile action could further tarnish the government’s reputation and disrupt its rapprochement with the Arab League. The Syrian army is currently over-stretched and cannot afford to redeploy to As-Sweida; military units are already [fighting ISIS in the Syrian Badia](#), [fighting opposition groups in the north](#), and [maintaining a sizable presence near the Euphrates](#) in Deir-ez-Zor. In As-Sweida in particular, the majority of its residents belong to the minority Druze community; the government is more lenient when dealing with minority communities since escalating against them could lead to loss of support.

The government could opt for imposing an economic/commercial and service-related siege on the governorate by withholding diesel, food, and medicine allocations initially, then by blocking services and restricting market access. This would further disenfranchise Syrians in these areas, causing yet more disunity in the already fractured state.

The government may try to appease protestors instead by introducing greater autonomy to local administrative councils and municipalities through its [local administration law 11/2015](#). It could also consider local demands to open a border crossing with Jordan to increase commercial and economic activity in the governorate, however, doing so could be unfeasible since it may not currently have the resources to open one, the crossing would be normatively under government control due to the presence of local militias, and since it is uncertain that Jordan would agree to it.

Another potential option could be the government intervening militarily in the governorate to face a terrorist threat [akin to the July 2015 attack](#); Syrian army units could deploy to the governorate based on the request of pro-government figures if ISIS threatened to attack. Local sources stated that these fears have increased following news of a possible [prison break](#) by ISIS members from Ghwei-

ran prison in Al-Hasakeh city in addition to [warnings](#) posted by pro-government media figures of a possible ISIS attack on the governorate.

Patients faced with price rises and medicine shortages

The Syrian Ministry of Health has [increased medicine prices by 50%](#) in an attempt to appease the pharmaceutical sector and ensure medicine is available on the market. The Ministry's Directorate of Pharmaceutical Affairs reportedly [modified the price](#) of 12,826 domestically produced medicines as a result of fuel price increases and the depreciation of the Syrian pound in August. The head of the Scientific Council for Pharmaceutical Industries, Nabil Kassir, said that the increases were in line with changes to the exchange rate, but insufficient to cover the existing gap between the cost of production and prices. The Ministry of Health sets the medicine prices without considering exchange rate fluctuations and the consequent growing cost of production pharmaceutical companies face as fuel and electricity costs keep increasing, especially after the steep fuel price increases on 16 August.

Medicine	Use	3 January (SYP)	15 August (SYP)	Percentage change
Cetamol (500mg)	Painkiller	1,800	8,000	344%
Augmentin (1000mg)	Antibiotic	15,000	25,000	67%
Grip Stop	Flu medication	2,500	7,000	180%
Clopid (75mg)	Antiplatelet medication	5,000	25,000	400%
Valsartan (160mg)	Treats high blood pressure	9,000	30,000	233%

Increase in the average price of different medicine in Damascus city between January and August 2023 (Source: CA-SYR).

The Ministry was left with no choice but to increase prices following a shortage of supply, with medicines no longer being profitable to produce. To pressure the Ministry of Health to respond, pharmacies shortened their opening times, and [withdrew a number of drugs](#) from their shelves, including those treating chronic diseases (such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes). Souad Issa, a pharmacist working in Homs, [said](#) that pharmaceutical industry representatives had stopped visiting pharmacies, making procuring medicine difficult; medicine

wholesalers are either delaying pharmacy orders or claiming that the requested medicine was unavailable.

Local sources reported that people are struggling to find the medicine they need, forcing them to purchase it for an exorbitant price on the black market; for example, the antibiotic Augmentin is [priced](#) at SYP 15,000 but sold on the black market for almost double the price, at SYP 27,000. Reportedly, the black market markup of certain medicine has [reached 100%](#).

Medicine solely provided by the Ministry of Health is also reportedly being sold on the black market. Kidney transplant patients in Tartous told media sources that the Ministry [has not been providing them with their prescribed medicine](#). Mycophenolate Mofetil and Tacrolimus, two prescribed immunosuppressants, have not been distributed to the health directorates across government-held areas for a year now. Patients must either order the medicine from abroad at a price ranging between SYP 150,000–200,000 per bottle or purchase them at an even higher price on the black market.

Insurance companies unprofitable since price increases

The general manager of the Insurance Supervisory Authority, Rafed Mohamad, said that insurance companies are [struggling to cope with the rapid inflation](#) in government-held areas – insurance premiums are now insufficient to cover patients' expenses including medicine and visitation fees. Insurance companies usually price their premiums based on prices set by the Ministry of Health and are not adjusted to the exchange rate, leaving a gap in insurance coverage. This forces insurance cardholders to pay the difference between the premium's coverage and the actual cost, which ends up being much of the sum.

Shortages not new

Medicine shortages in government-held areas are not particularly new. They happen [every six to seven](#) months, usually following steep depreciation of the Syrian pound and the consequent widening gap between prices and the cost of production.⁸ The government then faces a difficult choice; if it does not increase medicine prices, pharmaceutical companies will [not supply the medicine](#). However, if it increases prices, people are likely to protest. The 50% increase in prices, although significant, is unlikely to change much – pharmaceutical companies do not think it is enough and will probably continue to withhold medicine, while locals think it is too much.

⁸ The last [increase](#) in the Ministry of Health's prices took place in January after medicine prices [increased up to 70 percent](#).

Northeast Syria

SDF–DMC agreements fails, hostilities resume



Road into Deir-ez-Zor (Source: [Justice for Life](#))

An [agreement](#) to cease hostilities, made on 26 July between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC), failed to hold after DMC leader [Abu Khawla](#) and other prominent [DMC](#) members were arrested on 27 August in Al-Hasakeh. After news of the arrests broke out, a member of the DMC in Deir-ez-Zor [threatened](#) the SDF with violence should they not release the detainees. Simultaneously, media sources reported

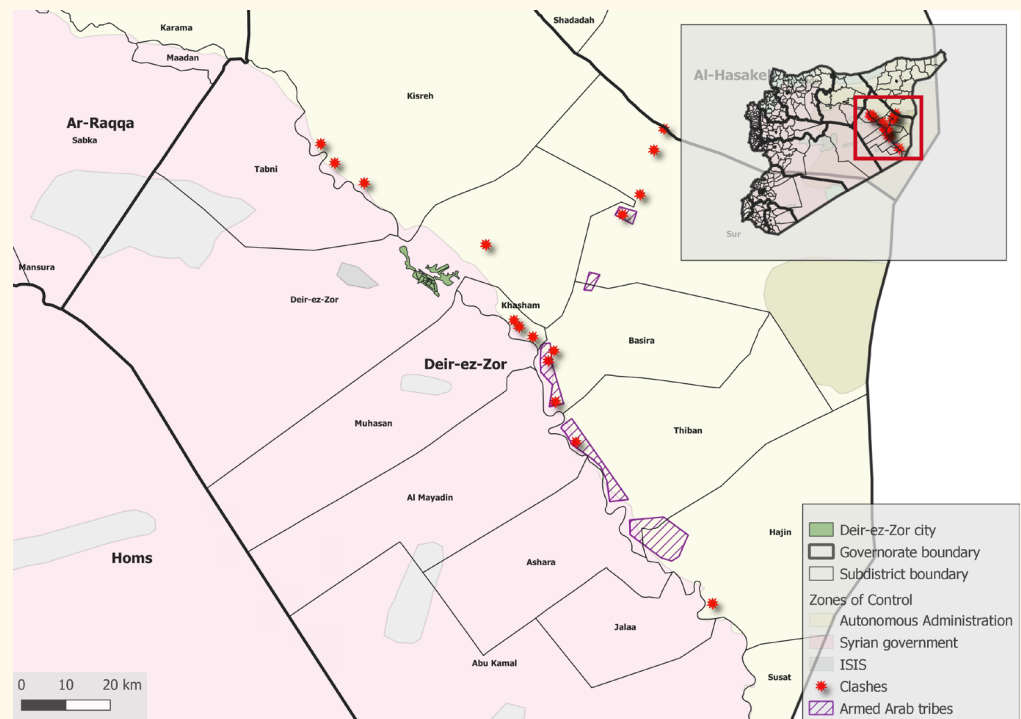
the SDF brought in reinforcements into [Al-Hasakeh](#) city amid rumors of an ISIS prison escape, and [launched](#) an anti-ISIS, anti-crime security operation, called 'Enhancing Security,' in Deir-ez-Zor. While unconfirmed, local sources noted the possibility that the SDF enhanced its presence in these areas in preparation for potential disturbances caused by the arrests.

The situation then escalated. The DMC sent reinforcements, (to areas primarily inhabited by members of the Bekir clan) to Khasham subdistrict in Deir-ez-Zor, while [clashes](#) broke out between the SDF and the DMC, with the help of local residents, in the late hours of 27 August in Izbeh and Hssein. From 28 August until 3 September, violence expanded beyond the Bekir clan's territory, as residents of Deir-ez-Zor took up arms against the SDF in [Shiheil](#), [Basira](#), [Abu Hamam](#) and other areas. By 2 September, media outlets [reported](#) that the SDF had lost control over land stretching from Thiban to Baguz alongside the river. The SDF [stressed](#) that their withdrawal was tactical rather than the result of defeat.

Deir-ez-Zor clashes (Source: *Local sources and media outlets*)

The unrest expanded in scope as non-combatants also joined the fight against the SDF. For a number of years, the people of Deir-ez-Zor have felt marginalized by a [lack of service provision](#), [rampant corruption](#), and [lax security measures](#). These grievances came to a head after anti-SDF local media outlets [reported](#) a number of violations targeting civilians. Local tribal leaders, such as the leader of the Ekeidat tribal confederation, Ibrahim al-Hifil, [called](#) on other tribes and local residents to unify to fight the SDF's discriminatory practices.

Another factor contributing to tensions escalating beyond the confines of the SDF–DMC dynamic was the divisive rhetoric employed by opposing sides. The SDF and Autonomous Administration official's rhetoric included that the operations in Deir-ez-Zor targeted the [remnants of ISIS](#), [criminals](#), and later [claimed](#) the developments were part of Iranian, the Syrian government, and Turkish



plans to destabilize the area. On the other hand, anti-SDF social media continuously depicted the SDF as a ‘Kurdish’ militia [committing abuses](#) against civilians in Deir-ez-Zor.

Despite the thorniness of this rhetoric, the SDF’s statements are not completely unfounded; Pro-GoS [tribal leaders](#) called on residents and tribes of Deir-ez-Zor to push against the SDF. Similarly, Ibrahim al-Hifil is also rumored to have maintained relations with the GoS throughout the entirety of the Syrian conflict. Reports have also been [circulating](#) on pro-SDF media outlets that the pro-government National Defense Forces (NDF) have been engaging in clashes against the SDF in Thiban, though the veracity of these claims is unclear.

US steps in to mediate

On 3 September, amid conflicting reports indicating continuous changes in territorial control between the SDF and the tribes, the US Embassy in Syria [announced](#) that US representatives met with the SDF and tribal leaders in Deir-ez-Zor emphasizing the need to de-escalate hostilities. According to the SDF official, tribal leaders presented their “legitimate” demands such as enhancing access to essential services and security conditions. Third-party guarantees/mediation could be [successful](#) as the US generally maintains good ties with the tribes, the DMC and the SDF. However, the prospects of long-term sustainable peace remain unlikely if deeply rooted issues are not addressed. Otherwise, hostilities could continue though perhaps in different forms, such as assassinations or other forms of violence against the SDF.

Unique tribal dynamics diminish negotiations

The tribal nature of Deir-ez-Zor combined with the changing nature of tribal roles and tribal disintegration over the years adds complexity towards achiev-

ing sustainable peace. Tribes are generally depicted as unified, monolithic constructs. However, tribes in Syria generally, and Deir-ez-Zor specifically, are largely divided. The abundance of competing actors seeking to gain influence in Deir-ez-Zor throughout the Syrian conflict fragmented tribes in terms of allegiances to different actors who supported different tribal leaders seeking to gain prominence.

With that in mind, the failure to get all tribes in Deir-ez-Zor to the table risks creating potential spoilers to the agreement or toward sustainable long-term peace and stability. [Studies](#) have shown how actors such as Turkey, Iran and the Syrian government have undergone outreach campaigns to tribal and clan leaders in order to create spheres of influence in northeast Syria to destabilize SDF-held areas through influencing constituents within its areas of control. [Rumors](#) floating online have already indicated that Iranian-affiliated tribal leaders have offered tribes in Deir-ez-Zor their support.

NDF clashes with Al-Jabour tribe in Al-Hasakeh



Al-Jabour tribe flag
(Source: [social media page](#))

On 13 August, the leader of the government-affiliated National Defense Forces (NDF) in Al-Hasakeh city, Abdul Qadir Hamo, physically assaulted Sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Muslat, from the al-Jabour tribe inside the city's security square. According to [media reports](#), Hamo and his men pulled Sheikh al-Muslat out of his car and beat him after a disagreement over driving his car through the square. In response to the incident, hundreds of members of the al-Jabour tribe gathered in front of Al-Muslat's house inside the city, while some reportedly stormed the security square [demanding](#) Hamo's and the NDF's dismissal. The tribe [reportedly](#) gave the Syrian government 24 hours to dismiss Hamo, or face 'harsh' consequences. A day later, clashes between both parties inside the square were [reported](#), leaving four al-Jabour tribal members injured in addition to an unidentified number of NDF fighters, prompting the SDF to deploy inside the city to calm the situation.

A sense of uncertainty and threats of escalation soon continued. On 16 August, a member of the al-Jabour tribe told media outlets that the Syrian government '[forced the tribe to declare war](#)', and that all negotiations with the government failed. Tribal figures from Deir-ez-Zor's Bakara clan [reportedly](#) sent reinforcements to aid the al-Jabour clan, while then DMC leader Abu Khawla also visited, [stating](#) that they would also provide support if needed. On 18 August, a Russian delegation [visited](#) the al-Jabour tribe, and stressed that they would convey their demands to Damascus in order to resolve the issue. Two days later, local sources reported that the Syrian government replaced a high-ranking military official in the governorate who reportedly informed Hamo that he was to surrender himself to be evacuated to Damascus by 24 August. While no news later emerged of Hamo's dismissal, the hostilities seem to have calmed down despite threats of escalation.

Abdul Qadir Hamo and the NDF in Al-Hasakeh

The National Defence Forces (NDF) is a government-affiliated militia established in 2012 by merging a number of armed groups to operate as the security

force for government-held neighborhoods and infrastructure. In 2015, Abdel Qadir Hamo [became](#) the leader of the NDF in Al-Hasakeh after his predecessor, Fadi Hantoush, was killed. According to local and media sources, Hamo is [re-portedly](#) backed by Iran, for whom he helped in recruiting individuals to increase Iranian influence and presence in Al-Hasakeh city. Hamo is allegedly a key actor in a [narcotics-smuggling](#) network, is accused of extortion, and is widely unpopular among both residents and other [Syrian government forces](#).

Tensions subside

Contrary to reports warning of an imminent escalation, local sources reported that no further escalation in Al-Hasakeh city took place. In addition, local sources also noted that there has been no indication that Hamo was dismissed from his position. Whereas the de-escalation could be attributed to a multitude of factors, such as the Russians successfully acting as a mediator, the lack of further escalation could be due to the clan's inability, or unwillingness to take on a foe such as the NDF.

Different political leanings within the al-Jabour clan towards larger actors likely disincentive the clan from moving forward. Similar to other clans in northeast Syria, the Jabour clan is divided concerning its affiliations to warring parties in Syria. For instance, one of Sheikh Abdul Aziz's sons, Salem al-Meslet, is the [president](#) of the National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces of Syria, while his nephew is the [head](#) of the government and Russian-sponsored Tribal Council and is a [parliamentarian](#). Because of these divisions, many have also been skeptical about the tribe's actual [willingness](#) to venture on and challenge the NDF.

In addition, whilst the clan was able to garner support from other clans and tribes, local sources noted that those who offered support also experienced similar fragmentation and also noted that the support sent to the Jabour was mainly symbolic in the form of statements and pledges to support the Jabour. It could also be that the clans indicating their support did so out of personal reasons. For instance, local sources noted that the support given by then-DMC leader Abu Khawla was largely an attempt to continue promoting himself as a main tribal figure in the area, but that his ability to send military support for the al-Jabour will likely be constrained by higher SDF leadership. In light of recent tensions between the SDF central leadership and the DMC, support from the DMC was likely to be unrealistic.

Russia looks to extend tribal links

[Studies](#) have previously shown how actors such as Turkey, Iran and the Syrian government have undergone outreach campaigns to tribal and clan leaders in order to create spheres of influence in northeast Syria. According to these studies, these undertakings are part of a strategy meant to create levers to oppose or destabilize the Autonomous Administration through influencing constituents within its areas of control. Consequently, Russia taking advantage of these incidents by exploiting the schisms that arise within clans – evident in the members of the al-Jabour clan reportedly having opposing views on how to move forward against the NDF – opens the possibility for Russia to establish communication

and carry out outreach initiatives with tribal members that would serve itself. This would not be the first time Russia attempted to increase its influence in northeast Syria through mediation conflicts. In 2021, Russia reportedly intervened and brokered the deal that ultimately saw the NDF's withdrawal from [Quamishli](#) after clashing with the SDF.

Upstream battle to find solutions to water shortages in Al-Hasakeh

On 3 July, the co-chair of the Administration's Directorate of Water in Al-Hasakeh [announced](#) a state of emergency in the city and its surrounding areas, in light of the continuing water crisis. Approximately a week later, the official [blamed](#) the deteriorating situation on Turkey's "systematic" policy of cutting off water feeding into the governorate from the Alouk water station – by not allowing the station to operate – which provides water for nearly [460,000 people](#) in the city. Disruptions mean households must [rely](#) on expensive water trucks provided by local authorities, NGOs, or private owners.

On 7 August, the same official [revealed](#) that UNICEF mediated an agreement between the Autonomous Administration and the armed factions controlling the station. According to the official, the agreement stipulated that the Administration would provide electricity to the station in return for the armed groups to operationalize 18 water wells and four water pumps to allow water to reach Al-Hasakeh city. Despite these statements, local sources noted that the situation has largely remained the same, with more households finding difficulties in securing water.

Administration announces (another) new water well project

On 3 August, in an attempt to provide a solution to the ongoing water crisis, Administration authorities [announced](#) an \$18 million water infrastructure project in villages and areas south of Amuda. The project intends to introduce 20 water wells, establish a pumping station, and install 62-kilometer-long pipes with the overall aim of establishing new sources to pump water into Al-Hasakeh city.

Despite the initiative, many residents remain skeptical of the project. The Administration has previously promised similar solutions, yet none have materialized; for instance, in 2020, there was a planned project to pump water from wells located in Al-Hamma to Al-Hasakeh city to cover half of the city's needs. According to [media sources](#), improper planning and geological factors prevented the project from success.

Neighboring Ar-Raqqah and Deir-ez-Zor residents send help

Residents of Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqah have been sending support to their neighbors in Al-Hasakeh. On 30 July, [activists](#) and [tribal leaders](#) in Autonomous Administration-held Deir-ez-Zor launched 'faza'at,' or acts of communal solidarity, to sponsor water tanks in Al-Hasakeh city to provide water to residents for free. A day later, media outlets [reported](#) that the initiative also sparked Ar-Raqqah

residents, clan members and charities to launch a similar initiative. According to local sources, these initiatives continued throughout the first two weeks of August – the SDF also got involved, sponsoring 40 water trucks into Al-Hasakeh.

Unfortunately, one unintended consequence of the charitable initiatives was to cause shortages elsewhere. The water paid for in bulk by the initiatives was more attractive to water truck drivers than individual purchases – many chose to supply Al-Hasakeh as a result, while people in neighborhoods not earmarked to receive free water faced delivery problems.

Administration faces a lack of viable options

Water shortages in Al-Hasakeh will remain an issue. Any projects planned by the Administration will need time to implement, if they even get past the planning stages. As it stands, residents will have to continue relying on water trucks for their needs. Apart from the high cost (which is only getting higher with inflation) various [studies](#) have reported concerns that these private vendors are often unregulated, with the risk that the water could be unsafe for consumption. Prolonged water shortages in Al-Hasakeh could not only mean difficulties securing water, but that the alternatives could lead to a spike in water-related diseases. Initiatives by local actors in Deir-ez-Zor or Ar-Raqqa seeking to temporarily alleviate the situation, though beneficial, also risk disrupting markets.



Water trucks traveling to Al-Hasakeh (Source: [Rozana radio](#))

Northwest Syria

HTS arrests deputy leader Qahtani

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham continued its [arrest campaign](#) of individuals accused of having affiliations with foreign and local competing actors in northwest Syria throughout August, albeit at a decreased pace. The most recently reported arrest took place on 29 August when HTS security forces [arrested](#) five HTS members in Idleb city. The most significant in July was the arrest of Abu Maria al-Qahtani, deputy to HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, accused of communication with foreign intelligence agencies. On 14 August, media sources [reported](#) Qahtani being put under house arrest, with local sources reporting Qahtani had been taken to prison approximately a week later.

Qahtani was reportedly [implicated](#) by his personal guard, Abu Yazan Al-Deri, who had also been arrested and accused of spying for western actors. The HTS General Command published a statement on 17 August confirming that Qahtani's role and duties were suspended after "he made a mistake in directing his communications without taking into account the sensitivity of his position or the necessity of asking permission and clarifying the purpose of this communication."

The arrest of a high-ranking HTS commander like Qahtani is counter to HTS's previous claims that the detainees were low-ranking HTS officers and newly recruited [members](#).

Jolani's trusted advisor

Qahtani's importance within HTS cannot be overstated – he has been with Jolani since before they helped found Jabhat al-Nusra, the precursor group to HTS.⁹ Jolani is said to have considered him one of his most trusted advisors. He is an influential leader within the Al-Sharqiyah Bloc (formed of HTS members from Aleppo and eastern Syria), one of two most influential Blocs which make up HTS, the other being the Bennsh Bloc. He has close ties to major economic and financial [actors](#) within HTS and reportedly previously been [key](#) to communicating with Syrian National Army (SNA) factions with the aim of forming alliances with HTS. Amid unsubstantiated [rumors](#) indicating Qahtani had ambitions to become HTS's general commander, HTS's Bennsh Bloc, lead by Jolani's brothers-in-law,¹⁰ [put](#) pressure on Jolani to move against Qahtani. The Bennsh Bloc leaders' were also possibly motivated by a conflict over power and resources between the two Blocs.

The language of the HTS statement regarding Qahtani is revealing in its moderations. The statement mentioned that Qahtani made a "mistake in directing his

⁹ An Iraqi national, Qahtani started as a Nusra Shari officer in Deir-ez-Zor before moving to Dar'a and later Idleb in 2014.

¹⁰ Al-Mughera Abo Hamza Bennsh and Abo Hafs Bennsh, who are from Bennsh village, Idleb subdistrict.

communications,” which indicates that HTS was aware of his communications with either foreign states or SNA factions. The relatively forgiving tone could also be due to a desire not to provoke Qahtani’s supporters within HTS, to mitigate internal conflict or defections. He is also reportedly sick, suffering from a serious, incurable [disease](#), and physically unable to do anything – a potential other reason for clemency.

So far, Qahtani’s support base has not reacted to his arrest. One possible reason for the lack of a reaction could be that Jolani met with the [leaders](#) of the Al-Sharqiyah Bloc and presented to them evidence of infractions Qahtani had committed. Despite the presence of signs of conflict within HTS so far, it is expected that the competition between the two separate blocs will continue (over influence and resources), but remain civil as long as Jolani can maintain order.

Popular Green Energy initiative buys electricity from small-scale solar farms



Small-scale solar farm on agricultural land in Idlib, (Source: [Syria TV](#))

On 1 July, media outlets reported that Green Energy [would buy](#) surplus electricity generated by solar panels in areas controlled by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG).¹¹ Many viewed this as an investment opportunity, and invested in small-scale solar farms. [Green Energy](#) began [supplying](#) SSG-held areas in Idlib and western Aleppo with Turkish electricity in May 2021; today it holds a monopoly in these areas, supplying electricity throughout SSG-held areas.

¹¹ Green Energy divided the price at which it would buy electricity from investors into two categories: If the individuals/investors sell parts of their electricity quantities to the company, Green Energy will procure those quantities at 45% of the price of a kilowatt Green Energy sells to consumers ([\\$18 cents](#)). If investors sell all their generated electricity quantities to Green Energy, the price will increase to 55%.

SSG red tape puts investors at risk

According to local sources, many individuals applied to get approval to install solar panels with the intent of selling electricity to Green Energy. Incentivizing this were the low barriers to entry set by Green Energy to procure privately generated electricity. Some of these [requirements](#) included:

- The investment location must be included in Green Energy's area of operations.
- The system must generate at least 30 kilowatts of electricity.
- The applicant must own a private electrical transformer, or the site must be 200 meters or less from the company's nearest transformer.
- The contract period must be for a minimum of three years.
- The system must adhere to the necessary technical conditions and [specifications](#), including safety requirements.
- Applicants must provide Green Energy with a complete electrical study accompanied by diagrams and catalogs for all the equipment used.

Prior to installing solar panels, individuals wishing to do so must get approval from the SSG. With the increase in requests for investment, the SSG Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation published a new set of conditions for obtaining approval to install a solar energy system, as follows:

- The land must be unsuitable for agriculture.
- If the land is suitable for agriculture, only 10% of the land area is allowed to be used for electricity generation.
- Individuals cannot clear their land; If the land is planted with trees, the system must be installed in empty spaces or raised on metal bases.
- Individuals cannot cover their land in gravel or stones to make it easier to install solar panels. In case of violation, the violator will be fined \$500 per dunum.

Local sources also noted that individuals wishing to install solar panels south of the M4 highway would have to obtain additional security approvals.

The added red tape by the SSG has restricted entry into the market, with many people now unable to adhere to the conditions. For past projects, many have been set up on agricultural land: It is unclear whether these systems will now be defunct, and whether they will represent wasted investment for individuals. The SSG justified the intervention as an attempt to regulate the market, however, local sources believe it could also be an attempt to limit the market, to the benefit of individuals with close links to HTS.

Initiative provides jobs, reduces dependence on Turkey

Green Energy's decision to procure privately generated electricity provided greater livelihood and employment opportunities in northwest Syria. In recent

years, small-scale solar farms have spread widely in northwest Syria, used for agricultural and residential purposes. With Green Energy open to procuring privately generated solar electricity, people either expanded their existing systems, or invested in new ones, enabling farmers and landowners throughout the area to diversify their revenue streams.

These projects have had many positive effects; they provided [jobs](#) (guards to protect the systems from theft, electrical engineers or technicians to monitor the [performance](#) of the panels, and workers to wash the panels on an almost daily basis), and revived trade in solar panels and other electrical equipment necessary for the project. Additionally, these projects have created a new source of electricity, reducing dependence on Turkish electricity supply.

Investment in solar energy too risky for most

Despite the positive impact of the initiative well as the conditions imposed by the SSG's Ministry of Agriculture, the large financial cost required for investment limits the opportunity to a limited number of investors with sufficient capital. According to one of the investors, the smallest electrical system that meets the company's requirement to provide 30 kilowatts per hour costs at least \$19,000. Investors would also need to purchase at least 200 high-quality solar panels at a price of approximately \$45 for each, an inverter with a capacity of 40 kilowatt which costs approximately \$2,500, and an electric transformer from the company specifically for \$7,500.

The lack of security and stability in the region, particularly the exposure to aerial campaigns and shelling, are also deterrents to installing solar panels, especially in areas close to the frontlines. The possibility of large-scale military operations that lead to a change in the current areas of control would also be a disincentive. The solar energy investment project is considered profitable, convenient, and likely productive, which has compelled some agricultural actors to halt crop production and shift to selling electricity only. If this trend increases, agricultural production in the region may be affected and impact food prices and quantities available in the markets.

AK Energy in Aleppo raises electricity prices, sparking protest

During August, popular protests erupted in northern Aleppo areas against the electricity company, AK Energy, against their decision to raise [electricity prices](#). The company decided to raise the price of a kilowatt for domestic use from TRY 3.20 to 4.50, and for commercial and industrial use from TRY 4.5 to 5.5.

The company retracted the decision because of public anger, but repeatedly rationed electricity supply during the following week, under the pretext of its financial deficit, and its inability to raise prices because people could not afford them. Later, the company returned and confirmed its decision to raise prices on 19 August, which expanded the scope of the protests. The protesters closed the company service centers in Al-Bab, Azaz, and Akhtrein amid calls for an open sit-in until the decision to raise was reconsidered.



Protests against AK Energy (Source: [Syria TV](#))

Local councils struggle against AK Energy monopoly

The company's director [justified](#) price increases by saying previous prices were no longer tenable, with the depreciation of the Turkish lira, and the increase in dollar purchase price of the power. He added that, in dollar values, the price of electricity has not

changed and that local councils were informed prior to the company's decision to increase prices.

Local councils in northern Aleppo reacted to the increase in several ways. First, the local councils in Al-Bab, Bazagha and Qabasin [denied](#) knowledge of the company's intention to raise prices and formed a committee of council lawyers to file a lawsuit. Second, local councils in [Azaz](#), Azaz subdistrict and [Al-Bab](#), Ar-Ra'ee, Qabasin, and Bazagha, Al-Bab subdistrict put out a request for tender to take over supplying electricity; they did not specify whether the contract with AK Energy had been terminated, or whether other companies would be competing with its prices.

Ak Energy has been raising its prices for the past few years, contrary to its director's statement. While the director's comments are valid in terms of the dollar value of electricity prices, electricity is sold to consumers in Turkish lira.

With the lira depreciating against the dollar by 74% over the past three years, consumers have repeatedly been forced to pay more. The most recent increases were recorded in [January](#) 2023, when prices for domestic use increased from TRY 2.85 to 3.8 per kilowatt. Similar to August, these increases were accompanied by almost identical protests.

Repeated price increases indicate the inability of local councils to force the company to adhere to the terms of the contracts signed with them. The local councils' announcement to solicit offers for the new electricity providers does not seem feasible, as investment would be necessary. AK Energy owns most of the electricity infrastructure and would be unlikely to allow other producers – such as the Syria-Turkish Company (STE) – to transmit their electricity.

High prices put pressure on an already stretched population

The decision to raise electricity prices will have a significant impact on residents of northwest Syria. Many residents are already struggling to make ends meet, and the increase in electricity prices will make it even more difficult for them to afford basic necessities. For example, a house needs an average of [6 kilowatts](#) per day at a monthly price of approximately TRY 800 (\$30); this is not commensurate with the average income in the region, which raises the option of relying on expensive solar panels and batteries rather than Turkish electricity. The decision will also have a significant impact on businesses in northwest Syria. The

increase in prices will likely be passed on to consumers, and perhaps shrink revenue and profit margins.

As commerce and livelihoods in northwest Syria are quite fragile, decreased revenue may lead to further job losses and exacerbate ongoing economic decline in the region. AK Energy provides its services in Al-Bab, Jarablus, Azaz, Ar-Ra'ee, Ghandoura, Bazagha, Qabasin, Tal Abyad, and Ras Al-Ain, while the Syrian-Turkish Company (STE) provides Afrin, Mare', and Soran.

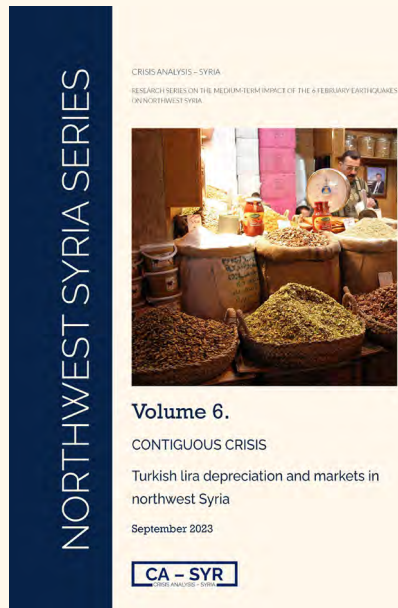


Regional Situation Analysis

The potential impact of black sea escalations on food security in the Middle East and North Africa

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa have contended with food insecurity for decades as their populations grow alongside increased demand for imported foodstuffs. This has left many countries across the region heavily or partially dependent on imported grains, in particular those exported through the Black Sea. This dependency came to the forefront in 2022 when grain shipments from Ukraine were at risk of being completely halted prior to the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) being struck. This paper examines the risks facing certain Middle Eastern countries considering a series of conflict escalations affecting Black Sea grain exports following Russia's withdrawal from the BSGI in July. (Mercy Corps Website).

[Go to report](#)

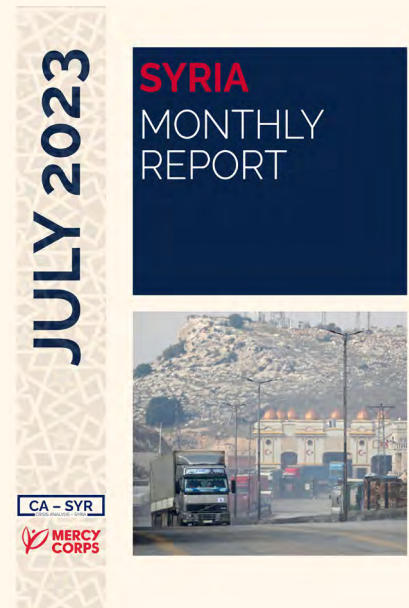


NWS Series Volume 6.

Contiguous Crisis: Turkish lira depreciation and markets in northwest Syria

Recent depreciation of the Turkish lira is causing a ripple effect on markets in northwest Syria. Here, Crisis Analysis - Syria assesses the statistical impact of Turkish lira depreciation on prices in northwest Syria and the reactions taken by consumers, business owners, and traders. Decline of the lira and further inflationary pressure is expected in the months to come. Understanding these market dynamics is crucial to building programs that help alleviate the burden already being placed on the most vulnerable communities in the northwest.

[Go to report](#)



CA-Syria Monthly Report, July 2023

Russia's veto of the proposed 9-month extension of the UN cross-border mechanism into northwest Syria has left humanitarian organizations searching for an alternative. Black market depreciation of the Syrian pound and collapsing provision of services are symptoms of the economic struggles in government-held areas. In the northeast, shop owners are angry, and protesting the Autonomous Administration's continuously rising taxes. Conflict between the Deir-ez-Zor Military Council and the SDF threatens to destabilize security, undermining the SDF's control. The SSG has dissolved local councils, and replaced them with a more centralized structure which could improve coordination, however is a shift away from community engagement. HTS arrested a number of its own members, accusing them of espionage, but also downplayed the level of the security breach. Further arrests are expected.

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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.

