

SYRIA

MONTHLY
REPORT

FEBRUARY 2024



February 2024

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.

Politics and policy



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Amman, Jordan

In line with legislation to combat money laundering and terrorism finance, Jordan is scrutinizing financial transactions involving Syria and Iraq. Finance representatives noted a decrease in financial transactions via money exchange offices in Iraq, and the Central Bank of Jordan re-imposed strict measures on transactions to and from Syria.

5

Economy and markets



Damascus, Syria

President Bashar Al-Assad issued decrees 7/2024 and 8/2024 increasing the salaries of public sector employees and military personnel, including part-time employees and retirees, by 50%.

11

Humanitarian updates



Northwest Syria

The Response Coordination Group (RCG) reported that more than 134,000 IDPs have been affected by torrential rainfall over the winter. Damages were recorded in 22% of camps across the region, while more than 94% of the two million IDPs in northwest Syria have experienced difficulties securing food.

15

Humanitarian updates



Amman, Jordan

The EU announced it will be giving UNICEF 10 million euros to improve the education, integration and wellbeing of children and youth across Jordan and inside schools and refugee camps. UNICEF's partnership with the EU is part of a wider programme aimed at children and adolescents in Syrian refugee camps.

25

Conflict and security



Mansura, northeast Syria

14 truffle pickers were killed and eight others wounded after a landmine explosion in Rasafeh desert, southwest Ar-Raqqa. A number of civilians and Syrian government affiliates were also killed by unidentified gunmen, likely ISIS cells, while searching for truffles in eastern Hama, eastern Homs and rural Deir-ez-Zor.

26

Economy and markets



Damascus, Syria

The head of the Association of Bakeries in Damascus, Mamdouh al Biqa'i, has proposed an increase in the price of bread throughout the Ramadan period. This is to meet the rising cost of bread production, and particularly flour and fuel, which the association estimates to cost 8.5 million SYP per ton and 13,000 SYP per liter respectively.

26

Services



Northeast Syria

Despite the risk of respiratory illness, residents in northeast Syria continue to rely on kerosene stoves, due to a shortage of gas cylinders following Turkish airstrikes on power plants and oil facilities early this year.

28

Social instability



Idleb, northwest Syria

Local activists have organized protests in the city of Idleb, calling for the resignation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and demanding information about detainees held in HTS prisons.

Executive Summary

The US House of Representatives passed the Anti-Normalization Act on 14 February, meaning the bill will now pass to a vote in the Senate. The primary purpose of the legislation is to prohibit “any official action to recognize or normalize relations” with the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad. It also expands Caesar sanctions to include additional pro-government individuals and entities; provides for investigation into the Syria Trust for Development and into the potential benefits to the Syrian government of the United Nations’ presence in the country; and proposes an inter-agency strategy to monitor efforts to normalize relations with the Syrian government.

In south and central Syria, the Syrian government increased the price of subsidized goods and basic services. Fuel, electricity, and bread prices were all increased to reduce expenditure and ensure the continuity of service provision. However, these increases place a further financial burden on cash-strapped Syrian households, and are likely to increase consumer prices ahead of the upcoming month of Ramadan. Former opposition groups in Dar’a appear to have united, and are now fighting together against both the Syrian government and alleged Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-affiliates in several locations, most notably Yadudeh and Mhajeh. This new-found unity has been solidified by several tribal reconciliations, particularly in the western countryside between the al-Zo’bi and al-Baradan tribes.

In northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES)’s Internal Security Forces (ISF) seized hundreds of thousands of Captagon pills and other illicit materials in Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) and Ar-Raqqa. Despite these efforts, AANES-held areas continue to be a lucrative marketplace and transit hub for narcotics, amid reports of increasing levels of addiction in the region. Meanwhile, alleged ISIS attacks in Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli cities signal the potential ability of the group to inspire lone-wolf attacks in areas previously thought secure. This highlights that a security-first approach to curb ISIS activity in AANES-held areas is insufficient, and should be supplemented by measures to address the social and economic drivers of recruitment to the group.

In northwest Syria, tensions heightened between the Mawali tribe and the Syrian National Army (SNA), after a tribal member detained by an unidentified SNA faction was killed under torture. Although the tribe accused the SNA-affiliated Sultan Suliman Shah (Amshat) and Sultan Murad Division (SMD) of the crime, Amshat has denied any responsibility, and the SNA’s Military Police have launched no investigation into the matter. In response to the killing, the Mawali tribe called on its members to defect from Amshat. An Amshat leader was also assassinated by unknown assailants in an incident that may be linked to the clashes. Fearing a possible military escalation between both sides, 400 families fled the area.

International

House of Representatives passes anti-normalization act

South and Central

Syrian government increases the price of basic services

Former opposition groups unite in Dar’a

Northeast Syria

Drug epidemic in Ar-Raqqa and Tabqa grows

Increased spotlight on ISIS attacks in Al-Hasakeh

Northwest Syria

Security tension in Afrin after the killing of a detainee under torture

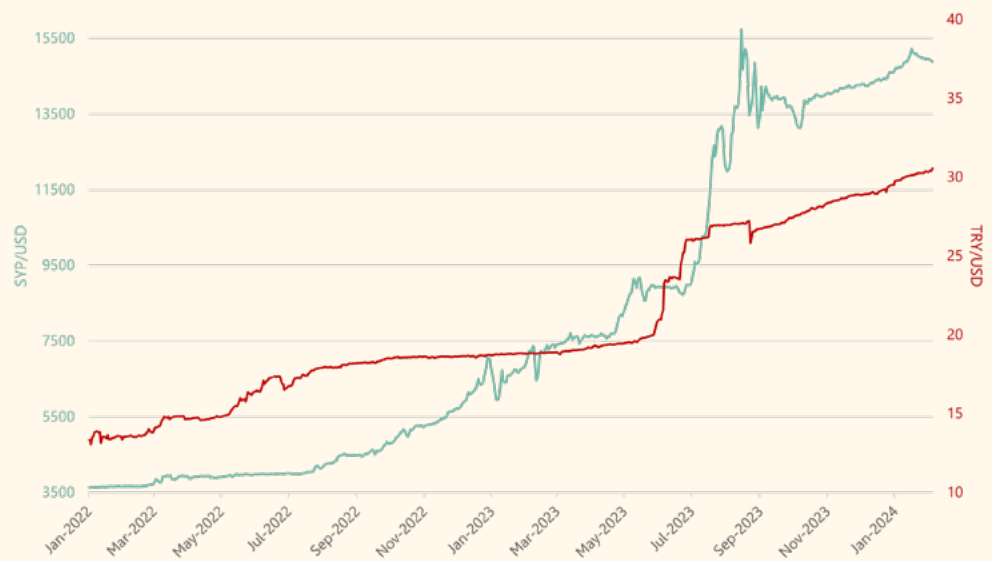
Cover image: Officers of the Directorate of Narcotics Control of Saudi Arabia’s Interior Ministry sort tablets of Captagon. (Source: [The National](#))

Economic Indicators

	December 2023	January 2024	February 2024
SYP/USD official exchange rate	12,600	13,200	13,200
SYP/USD parallel market rate	14,386.30 (1.6%)	14,921.00 (3.7%)	14,827.8 (-0.6%)
TRY/USD official rate	29.10 (1.4%)	30.10 (3.4%)	31.3 (4.0%)

Economic indicator 1.

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



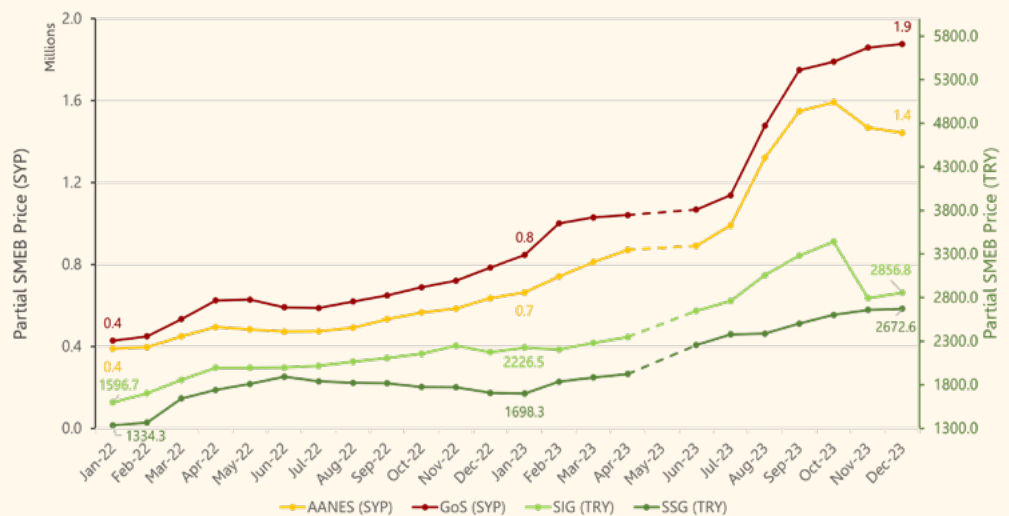
Economic indicator 2.

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 2,100kcal daily diet per person. Items covered in the assessment include basic food items such as bread, rice, bulghur, lentils, oil, sugar, meat, vegetables, and fruit.



International

House of Representatives passes anti-normalization act

On 14 February, the United States House of Representatives passed the '[Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act](#)' with a two-thirds majority vote, and now it heads to the Senate. The primary purpose of the legislation is to prohibit "any official action to recognize or normalize relations" with the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad. Accordingly, it [serves as a warning](#) to countries in the process of normalizing relations with the Syrian government by threatening them with sanctions. The bill establishes an inter-agency strategy to counter normalization by monitoring financial transactions with the Syrian government and diplomatic meetings at ambassadorial level (or above) between the government and countries in the region.¹ It also enables the US government to fully implement sanctions on those who engage in normalization with the Syrian government; this includes the Caesar sanctions and Executive Order No. 13894.



Image 1: Arab delegations visit President Assad in May 2023. Source: [The National](#).

The bill comes in response to an effort by Arab countries to reintegrate the Syrian government, following the [February 2023 earthquake](#). The Arab League [welcomed Assad back into the Arab League](#) in May 2023, and a process was established with conditions for the government's reintegration into the region. Despite the [perceived failure of this process later in the year](#), and the government's reluctance and/or inability to meet the conditions required of it, [the UAE assigned an ambassador for Syria in January](#) for the first time since the start of the conflict. [Pro-government media reported](#) that Saudi Arabia would soon be resuming consular services in Syria.

¹ le, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Lebanon.

Additional sanctions

The Anti-Normalization Act further expands the Caesar sanctions to include additional officials and pro-government figures. Specifically, the bill provides for sanctions on members of parliament, senior political figures in the Baath party's Central Command, Central Committee and Auditing and Inspection Committee, leaders of local Baath party branches, Syria Arab Airlines, and Cham Wings, among others. The bill also expands the Caesar sanctions to include sanctions on individuals engaged in the following activities: aid diversion; sale or resale of diverted humanitarian assistance; seizure, confiscation, or theft of property; transactions with or in return for property.

In addition, the bill provides for an investigation of the Syria Trust for Development, founded by First Lady Asmaa al-Assad, in order to determine whether it too should be sanctioned. Finally, UN agencies are also implicated in the bill, which seeks to uncover if and how the Syrian government is benefitting from the UN's presence in government-held areas.

Bill, not yet law

The Anti-Normalization Act is only in the initial phase of the process towards becoming law. Having passed in the House of Representatives, the bill must now pass in the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, before being approved by the Senate. Once the bill has passed through Congress, it will require the signature of the US President to become an enforceable law. [The bill was received by the Senate](#) on 26 February, but, at the time of writing, has yet to be discussed and voted on. Despite these remaining steps, it is likely that the bill will be approved with few to no complications due to the [popular support](#) and [bipartisan sponsorship](#) which have so far exempted it from political wrangling.

Revenue streams likely to become more constrained

If enacted, the bill in its current form will likely continue to constrain the Syrian government's economy, both due to the addition of new sanctionable entities and the protracted terms of the sanctions. The UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, Alena Douhan, warned that the act ["could worsen the already dire humanitarian situation of the Syrian people and destroy their hope of rebuilding a peaceful life."](#) Douhan predicts serious repercussions that could hamper reconstruction efforts at a time when 70% of the Syrian population requires humanitarian assistance, and the country's critical infrastructure is barely functional.

Specifically, the bill could discourage more countries from trading with government-held areas, leading to a reduction in suppliers, a further limitation of the export market for Syrian products, and a consequent reduction in the amount of foreign currency generated from commercial activities. The bill could also discourage investors from opening or contributing to new businesses and projects inside the country for fear of being sanctioned. This would deprive government-held areas of much-needed job opportunities and the growth of its productive sectors.

[Extensive research](#) in the past several years has highlighted that funding for humanitarian, early recovery and development programs [amounts to financial support for the Syrian government](#). The Syria Trust for Development reportedly [siphoned donor funding](#) intended for humanitarian programming to profit the Syrian government. More broadly, the Syrian government has also benefited from the UN's presence in government-held areas. The Syrian Central Bank funneled hundreds of millions of

dollars' worth of donor money into its coffers by manipulating the exchange rate¹, while the relatives of senior ministers and other pro-government figures have obtained employment in the UN's relief agencies.

The potential sanctioning of the Syria Trust for Development and increasing scrutiny of the UN's relationship with the government could therefore deny the government of revenue streams and benefits from which Assad and his cronies have previously profited. That loss of revenue would further deplete the Syrian government's coffers, pushing it towards more disruptive economic measures aimed at reducing spending and eradicating foreign currency from the economy.

² The central bank set an exchange rate significantly lower than the black market rate for UN and international organizations. For example, versus a black market exchange rate of 4,000 SYP per USD, the bank's rate for international organizations would be 2,500 SYP per USD, meaning the latter received only 62,500 of 100,000 USD's worth of funds, a 37.5% loss.

South and Central

Syrian government increases the price of basic services

Over the past two months, the Syrian government has increased the price of basic services and subsidized goods amid economic decline, resulting in increased consumer prices and an additional financial burden on households. In [February 2022](#), the Syrian government gradually reduced the number of recipients of its subsidy program while continuing to increase the price of basic services, principally in order to reduce state expenditure. The government's lack of resources, particularly the depletion of its foreign currency reserves, has prevented it from providing subsidies in the form of basic services, fuel, and food items. The subsidy removal essentially lifts the financial burden from the government's shoulders and places it instead on cash-strapped Syrian households, already suffering the ramifications of the conflict and of the country's subsequent [economic decline](#).

The Syrian government has continued this policy in the past two months by increasing the price of subsidized goods and basic services, including bread, fuel, and electricity, with the stated aim of reducing its expenditure and ensuring the continuity of these services. On 5 February, the Syrian Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection [increased the price of subsidized bread](#) by 100%, from 200 to 400 SYP per packet (\$0.027)³. [This increase was already anticipated](#), given previous statements by government officials about the increasing cost of bread subsidies. Taking into account the cost of bakery maintenance, fuel, and flour allocations, the subsidies cost trillions of Syrian pounds annually.

Refinement costs drive fuel prices up

The Ministry has increased the cost of petrol and diesel on [three separate occasions](#) since the start of 2024, amounting to an increase of between 13% and 22% (see Table 1).

Table 1: Fuel price increases in the past two months

Fuel type	25 Dec 2023 (in SYP)	3 Jan 2024 (in SYP)	4 Feb 2024 (in SYP)	19 Feb 2024 (in SYP)	% change
Octane 90 (1L)	900	9,500	10,500	11,000	22%
Octane 95 (1L)	12,1600	12,430	13,825	14,110	16%
Diesel (1L)	10,900	11,880	-	12,290	13%

The government continued to increase fuel prices even after it lifted petrol subsidies in August 2023, leading many to complain about the high prices. Dr Shafiq Arbash, an economics professor at the University of Damascus, [highlighted](#) that fuel prices

³ One bread packet contains seven loaves.

in Syria are approximately 20% higher than global prices, despite petrol consumption in the country being 50% lower than pre-conflict levels. Arbash attributed the price difference to high oil refinement costs for the production of petrol and diesel in Syria's outdated oil refineries.

Electricity prices increased to ensure continuity

On 18 February, [the Ministry of Electricity increased electricity prices](#) by between 316% and 575% (see Table 2) based on a new tariff structure. Prices were increased due to inflation and the increasing need for liquidity to ensure continuous electricity provision. [Electricity provision is costly for the government](#), which has budgeted 1,4500 billion SYP (\$1 million) to support the electricity sector in 2024. Residents currently only pay 76 SYP (\$0.0052) of the 1,700 SYP (\$0.11) needed to produce one kWh, with the government covering the rest. [Many and various challenges facing the electric sector](#) since the start of the conflict have hampered the provision of electricity to residents, with local sources noting that they only receive around two to four hours of electricity on average per day, at intermittent periods.

Electricity consumption category	Old price (in SYP)	New price (in SYP)	% change
Category 1 (1 - 600 kWh)	2	10	400%
Category 2 (601 - 1,000 kWh)	6	25	316%
Category 3 (1,001 - 1,500 kWh)	20	135	575%

Impact on market prices

Prices have significantly increased in Syrian markets since the beginning of 2024. Media outlets reported that food prices [increased by 40% in January alone](#), a steep rise given that 2023 saw a 100%-150% price increase over the entire year. [The price of a five-person meal has increased](#) by approximately 200% since 2023, from 70,000 to 150,000 SYP, and is expected to rise to 300,000 SYP during the upcoming Ramadan period. [Clothing prices have also surged by 300%](#) compared to the previous year. The price of some clothing items is now equal to a government employee's annual salary, with a mid-range suit costing up to 3 million SYP (\$207) and the cheapest option upwards of 2 million SYP (\$138).

Basic service and commodity price hikes are likely to generate further upward pressure, given the increased cost of production and supply chain. The increase in fuel and electricity prices will naturally raise the cost of production and transportation, thereby shifting the financial burden onto consumers. Wage increases are not only poised to lag behind consumer prices, but could place further monetary pressure on the Syrian pound. On 5 February, President Bashar al-Assad [issued Decrees 7/2024 and 8/2024](#), increasing the salaries of public sector employees and military personnel, including part-time employees and retirees, by 50%. This was the second increase in six months and the [fourth since 2020](#). [Arguing for the short-sightedness of these policies](#), Syrian economist Rasha Sirop claims that salaries have increased by 485% since 2020, while purchasing power has decreased by 61% as of 1 March 2024.

Former opposition groups unite in Dar'a

Former opposition groups in Dar'a have seemingly joined forces to fight alleged Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) affiliates and Syrian government forces across different locations in the past several months. Rival former opposition groups, such as the Dar'a al-Balad Central Committee (DCC), the Tafas Central Committee (TCC), and the Eighth Brigade, among others, have been fighting alongside one another since their commanders [met in Tafas in November 2023](#).

This is a notable development, given the long-standing [mistrust and competition between them](#). Infighting between various tribes and former opposition groups in Dar'a has been a key security trend for several years. This new-found unity has lately been solidified through tribal reconciliations, particularly in the western countryside. The government's perceived marginalization of Dar'a residents, and failure to assume its various responsibilities, has pushed residents in the area towards increasing self-reliance. These circumstances likely forced former opposition groups to set aside their differences and jointly pursue security stability independently of the government.

Clashes with the Syrian government and ISIS

Former opposition groups have joined forces on several occasions over the past three months: the two most notable examples were clashes that took place in the towns of Mhajeh and Yadudeh. On 15 February, [government forces raided Mhajeh](#), a town in eastern Dar'a, entering its northern and eastern neighborhoods. Government forces bombed certain parts of the town during the raid. Local sources stated that the operation aimed to arrest individuals wanted for attacking Russian and government forces.¹ Combatants from Mhajeh's Eighth Brigade unit, alongside reinforcements from opposition groups in Jasim, Nawa, and the western countryside, took on government forces, while the Eighth Brigade sent a military convoy from Busra Esh-Sham to separate both sides and de-escalate.

In another instance, on 8 January, former opposition groups, including the Eighth Brigade and the DCC, [attacked an armed group belonging to an alleged ISIS affiliate](#), Mohamad Jadallah al-Zo'bi, who is purported to be hiding in Yadudeh. Local sources reported that, besides their alleged links to ISIS, Jadallah and his group are accused of assassinating local figures including Raji al-Hashish, a prominent mediator and member of the TCC, who contributed to the détente between different local actors by encouraging reconciliation. According to local sources, the clashes between the two sides were intense, seeing the use of both small and medium weapons.² Five combatants, including Jadallah, were reportedly killed in the clashes, and sources gave accounts of a number of civilian casualties among families caught in the crossfire.

Tribal reconciliation solidifies new-found unity

Tribal reconciliations in the past several months have appeared to settle long-standing disputes between different tribes across Dar'a, at least for the time being. [The most notable reconciliation took place in Tafas](#), between al-Hazirain and al-Adwi tribes, who asked the larger al-Zo'bi and al-Baradan tribes to mediate and act as their guarantors.

⁴ The wanted individuals were accused of conducting an IED attack against a Russian military police convoy that killed one Russian soldier in December 2023, and for killing Captain Montajab Braidani, the head of the government's Criminal Security Branch in Izra' one week earlier.

⁵ The clashes quickly turned into a siege as Jadallah's group were cornered and surrounded in a neighborhood, while DCC members imposed a curfew in neighboring Mzeireb and Tal Shihab to prevent reinforcements from reaching Jadallah's group.

Against the backdrop of this first reconciliation, local sources indicated that the leaders of al-Zo'bi and al-Baradan subsequently arrived at [a reconciliation with one another](#), with each tribe deciding to revoke their protection of tribal members accused of assassinating local figures and contacting ISIS. Al-Zo'bi and al-Baradan are the two largest tribes in Dar'a, and both have their own armed groups who form the core of the TCC's military formations.

These efforts by commanders and community leaders face significant challenges from actors looking to sow division within the governorate. The Syrian government has in the past repeatedly been accused of facilitating assassinations, in an attempt to [create discord within Dar'a](#) by playing the different armed groups, tribes, and communities against one another, and thereby assert control. These 'divide and conquer' tactics have been used extensively by the government throughout Syria.



Image 2: Tribal reconciliation in Tafas city. Source: [Tafas al-Habiba](#).

While cooperation between the different armed groups has not officially been announced, the government is likely to perceive such an initiative as a challenge to its authority in Dar'a, and to take measures to prevent its success. The Syrian government already has normative control over large parts of the Dar'a because of the presence of former opposition groups and their mandate to maintain security in specific areas, following the July 2018 reconciliation. The formation of a broad network of highly organized and unified armed groups could pose an even bigger challenge to the Syrian government, rendering it more difficult to assert its control over the governorate.

Northeast Syria

Drug epidemic in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Thawrah

Throughout February, reports have emerged of several anti-narcotics operations led by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and its affiliated agencies in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Thawra seizing hundreds of thousands of Captagon pills and other illicit materials. This new uptick in efforts reflects an emerging reality in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Thawrah cities, as communities continue to struggle with increasing levels of addiction. Local sources report skepticism among local community members that such efforts will lead to substantial results.

A surge in anti-narcotics efforts, addiction, and trafficking

On 6 February, local sources reported that the ISF's Anti-Narcotics Forces arrested a narcotics smuggler moving from government-held areas through the Al-Thawrah checkpoint, carrying over 1,000 pills of Pregabalin – an addictive medication used to treat nerve-related pain – allegedly intended to be sold in Al-Thawrah. Later in the month, on 23 February, the Anti-Narcotics Force [also arrested two drug dealers in Al-Thawrah](#), who were reportedly carrying over 18,000 Captagon pills.

Counternarcotics raids have not been limited to Al-Thawrah. Amid a reported increase in narcotic use and trade in the city of Ar-Raqqa, the ISF reportedly [established several checkpoints to search passersby](#), in al-Mogamaa' Street, al-Rashid Garden, and al-Dalla Square. On 13 February, [authorities in Ar-Raqqa also confiscated a shipment](#) of over 320,000



Image 3: Captagon pill. Source: [France 24](#).

Captagon pills on the banks of the Euphrates River between Ar-Raqqa and Menbij, and only a few days later, on 26 February, [arrested a man allegedly carrying over 160,000 Captagon pills](#) near the city's Panorama Roundabout. According to [a statement from the ISF](#), the pills originated in the government-held Homs governorate and were intended for international markets. This assertion finds support in the [Syrian government's disclosure](#) that it intercepted a vehicle carrying 1.4 million drug pills in Aleppo on 22 February, as it made its way eastwards.

Media outlets continue to report on expansive narcotics networks in Syria, despite regional efforts to curb illicit trade. [A report published on 22 February](#) argues that northeast Syria serves as a transit point and marketplace, rather than a manufacturing base, for drugs. Narcotics like Captagon enter northeast Syria through Menbij and are then distributed throughout northeast Syria, where a single Captagon pill [sells for less than a dollar on average](#).

This growing issue has even forced communities to set up their own initiatives in an attempt to solve the problem. In October 2023, [an NGO launched several awareness campaigns](#) in Ar-Raqqa city warning young people about the dangers of addiction. Similarly, [a June 2023 campaign led by online activists](#) targeted narcotics dealers in the city. According to media and local sources, the campaign was so pervasive as to elicit a response by the ISF, who arrested several narcotics dealers exposed by the activists. Ultimately, however, these initiatives appear to have had little impact in curbing the phenomenon.

To further highlight the complexity of this issue, various sources have [accused individuals working within the Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\) of involvement in the narcotics trade](#) in Ar-Raqqa. It is difficult to ascertain these claims, especially since the situations they describe are complex and intertwined with other factors. In 2024, Ar-Raqqa residents observed a rise in drug use and addiction, while recent reports have pointed to a proliferation of [drugs within schools in the district](#). As highlighted by local stakeholders, poor economic conditions are a common catalyst for addiction among young people. This narrative is not only reinforced but expanded on by [reports identifying decreased economic opportunity as a factor driving individuals, not only towards narcotic use, but also towards the trafficking and selling of narcotics as a source of income](#). Other reports, meanwhile, stress that another [reason for the increasing levels of addiction among the youth](#) in Ar-Raqqa is the use of narcotics as a means to escape their harsh reality. This exemplifies the multifaceted nature of this issue.

Increased spotlight on ISIS attacks in Al-Hasakeh

The third phase of the so-called 'Operation Humanity and Security' in the Al-Hol camp, [initiated on 27 January, was concluded by the ISF on 6 February](#). In a [closing statement](#), the ISF stated that they had confiscated dozens of automatic rifles, landmines, and IEDs; destroyed several tunnels; dismantled numerous ISIS cells; and arrested dozens of individuals reportedly planning to take control of the camp and its surrounding areas in an attack. The statement also revealed that a high-ranking ISIS official, Abu Sufyan al-Luhaibi, responsible for coordinating ISIS cells in the area was neutralized during the operation.



Image 4: SF closing statement following operation 'Humanity and Security', 6 February.
Source: [PYD Website](#).

Despite these outcomes, ISIS later launched further attacks in Al-Hasakeh, which could signal an ongoing presence of the group in the region. On 8 February, ISIS reportedly [claimed responsibility for the killing](#) of [an employee of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria \(AANES\)](#) in the Al-Mufti neighborhood of Al-Hasakeh. Less than a fortnight later, on 17 February, the group claimed responsibility for [another attack targeting Syrian government officials](#) in the security square in Quamishli, which killed one soldier and injured another. On 27 February, the group claimed responsibility for [a third attack in Quamishli](#), this time targeting a Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) building, which resulted in minor material damages.

Genuine responsibility or an attempt to maintain relevance?

Media outlets were quick to identify ISIS's attacks in Al-Hasakeh as significant, quoting AANES employees who expressed [concerns about becoming targets for ISIS](#). Commentators in the media also emphasized that these attacks in Quamishli mark ISIS's first incursion into the city since 2019, prompting unease as to the group's overarching capabilities. These concerns were compounded by [statements from SDF personnel](#), indicating that the group currently harbors over 10,000 fighters operating covertly. Additionally, [media outlets](#) cite the group's claims of having undertaken more than 60 attacks since the start of 2024.

The most significant obstacle in determining whether these attacks signify a notable change in ISIS's capacities is the group's history of [falsely claiming attacks](#) in order to [maintain relevance](#). In light of the changing dynamics and emergence of other insurgents in Syria, such as the [Hashemite Tribal Regiment](#) and the [Arab Tribal Forces](#) in Deir-ez-Zor, ISIS may well falsely be claiming operations and attacks as its own to give the semblance of presence and relevance, and thereby bolster its recruitment. As such, its claims regarding attacks are not necessarily to be accepted. This is not to minimize [the threat posed both by the group](#) and by these attacks.

Attempting to discern the group's capacity and intentions from a scant number of



Image 5: SDF personnel removing ISIS flag in Al-Thawrah, April 2017. Source: [Rudaw](#).

attacks occurring within a single month is difficult. Given their isolation, these attacks provide no compelling grounds for alarm regarding an imminent takeover by ISIS of parts of Al-Hasakeh or Quamishli cities, nor regarding its capacity to launch large-scale attacks. Nonetheless, the fact that the attacks took place within Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli cities is noteworthy. Throughout 2023, [ISIS](#)

[attacks in northeast Syria](#) were mainly directed at Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa. While some incidents were recorded in rural parts of Al-Hasakeh governorate, none occurred in either Al-Hasakeh or Quamishli, a fact which could indicate the group's ability to inspire lone wolf attacks in cities to which ISIS has not had access for some years.

Amid the recent economic upheaval, in part resulting from the widespread damage to oil and electricity infrastructure following Turkish bombardment, ISIS may find heightened opportunities to expand its recruitment operations within the governorate in 2024. Turkey's recent aerial bombardment significantly hampered AANES's capacity to provide subsidized goods and commodities, compelling residents to resort to the costly black market for necessities. Alongside price increases and adverse policies directed at specific economic sectors, these economic difficulties mean that the group could find more fertile soil for recruitment than in previous years. Nonetheless, the actual scope of this recruitment potential remains speculative.

What can be stated, however, is that the security-first approach adopted by the SDF and ISF will not be the sole effective deterrent. It remains likely that these efforts will need to be supplemented by measures to address social and economic drivers of terrorism, in order to strengthen local communities and their resiliency against ISIS, or other groups capable of conducting such attacks. The backdrop to these attacks, in areas previously considered relatively secure, is the ISF's operation in Al-Hol and others throughout the years. As such, until the drivers behind recruitment are addressed, the SDF's response (which included another arrest campaign in Al-Hasakeh city on 25 February, resulting in the detainment of 16 more alleged ISIS affiliates and collaborators) is not likely to yield significant results.

Northwest Syria

Security tension in Afrin after the killing of a detainee under torture

Tensions arose in Afrin city on 1 February, after dozens of members of the Mawali tribe assembled in front of the city's military hospital in response to news of the death of one of their relatives. The victim, a member of the Ghazi clan within the Mawali tribe, was allegedly tortured and killed in imprisonment by an unidentified faction of the Syrian National Army (SNA) who detained him and four other members of the same tribe accusing them of abducting a Kurdish engineer from Bulbul. Relatives of the victim hold both the SNA-affiliated Sultan Suliman Shah (Amshat) and Sultan Murad Division (SMD) responsible for the crime. Responding to the allegations, the Amshat issued a statement denying any responsibility for the incident.

Anger among tribesmen and mobilization

In what appeared to be a preemptive attempt to defuse tensions, on 3 February, the SNA Joint Force – an SNA formation that includes the Amshat Division and the Hamzat Division – established a legal office that aims to support judicial decisions issued against any member of the Joint Force, and to secure the rights of plaintiffs as quickly as possible, without recourse to months-long lawsuits. Following the Mawali tribe's threats to carry out assassinations among the implicated SNA factions, Amshat sought to ease tensions by releasing the fourth detainee on 21 February. The other three had already been released.



Image 6: Mawali tribe members in solidarity with the victim's family. Source: [Facebook](#).

Displacement into Syrian Salvation Government-held areas

Tensions between the Mawali tribe and SNA factions are frequent in the area and have often triggered a series of events. An example of these tensions occurred in the city of Al-Bab in January, following the [arrest of a woman and her husband](#) from the Mawali tribe by the MP. In another incident, several residents of Deir-ez-Zor stormed the Ar-Raee Court after [five death sentences were issued](#) for individuals accused of a bombing in Azaz two years prior.



Image 7: Mawali tribe members in solidarity with the victim's family.

Source: [Facebook](#).

In this context, a Mawali tribe's reaction to the recent displacement is not unexpected. That said, this confrontation is expected to be contained in the assassination of some Joint Force leaders or members, or the targeting of their checkpoints, most likely within Afrin given the Amshat's presence. Likewise, the

Amshat actions throughout these events hint that retaliation to any possible security events is equally expected to be contained. If the cases are limited, the Joint Force will likely turn a blind eye and accept the tribe's retaliation in order to prevent extended confrontations. CA-SYR will continue to monitor and report on developments in this context.

Broadly, however, the drivers of the events unpacked above are largely a symptom of ongoing dynamics linked to the implications of historic and current displacement, and inorganic governance structures. These ongoing themes can deteriorate life for ordinary individuals and also dent the effectiveness of humanitarian operations. In other words, the events that took place February personify how quickly actors could escalate issues and threaten overall stability. The events that took place in February highlight the synergy needed between stabilization actors and their attempts at resolving deep-rooted instability drivers such as the need for governance structures to strengthen civil-military relations and justice, for humanitarian operations, and their attempts to alleviate hardship, to have a greater chance and success.



CA-Syria Monthly Report, January 2024

During the 21st Astana Process session on January 24 and 25 in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana, Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed to sustain de-escalation efforts, notably in northwest Syria. The parties, however, failed to agree on tangible steps to resolve the Syrian conflict. The US responded to an attack conducted by Iran-backed groups after three US personnel were killed when Iran-backed groups targeted the US 'Tower 22 outpost in Jordan. While the retaliatory strike led to a decrease in attacks, they persisted without cessation. Local armed groups in As-Sweida extended an offer to assist Jordan in its quest to combat cross-border narcotics smuggling after alleged Jordanian airstrikes led to civilian deaths. In other developments, President Bashar al-Assad issued decrees prohibiting residents from engaging in foreign currency transactions or pricing goods and services in any currency other than the Syrian pound. In northwest Syria, the Syrian government granted a six-month extension to the 'consent model,' allowing the UN to utilize the Bab Al-Hawa crossing for cross-border aid deliveries. Major water pumping projects to Idlib City were suspended by funding cuts, leading to supply shortages...



2023 Syria in Review: Executive Report

CA-SYR is proud to present our annual year-in-review publication. In the 2023 edition, CA-SYR elected to split the overview up based on trend-focused reports: Economic, Political, Conflict, and Humanitarian. In acknowledgment of the overall length of this analytical overview, CA-SYR has also provided an executive report, aggregating the executive summaries and key takeaways from each thematically specific report. While much of this reporting constitutes a retrospective summary of the previous year, each product includes novel quantitative visual analysis, expanded, up-to-date qualitative narrative analysis on the critical dynamics of 2023, and forward-looking perspectives for 2024 and beyond.



Cash Flow Conundrum: Policy Shifts and Volatile Hwala Fees, January 2024

Informal financial mechanisms supporting hawala transfers from the Syrian diaspora, commercial entities, and humanitarian/development groups have been crucial for many within Syria. Centralizing their operations in Erbil due to its proximity to Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES)-controlled areas and lenient banking regulations, hawala operations faced disruptions in late 2023. In this report, CA-SYR aims to unravel the uncertainty revolving around how hawalas function, what are the determinants for transfer fees, and how these policy changes led to increased hawala fees and payment delays. CA-SYR also looks beyond, examining the consequences of decisions in both Iraq and northeastern Syria while outlining potential repercussions in 2024 on humanitarian/development organizations in addition to households and markets.

CONTACT

Eric Economy
Crisis Analysis – Syria
eeconomy@mercycorps.org

Crisis Analysis – Syria (CA-SYR) 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.

This report is for humanitarian and development purposes only. CA-SYR strives to ensure products are impartial. The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of Mercy Corps as an organization.

