

SYRIA

MONTHLY
REPORT

JANUARY 2024

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.

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Regional and international updates

Amman, Jordan

Media outlets circulated news that Jordan's Central Bank issued a circular adding more regulation to licensed currency exchange companies that previously obtained approvals to conduct business dealings with Syria. In effect, the circular restricts transfers with the end beneficiary being a third-party money transfer company. End beneficiaries, whether in Jordan or Syria, need to be verifiable persons and cannot be companies.

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Regional and international Updates

Ankara, Turkey

In an interview, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, said that preventing a new conflict between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition is a priority for Turkey. Fidan said that prevention was in his country's interests in order to prevent a new wave of immigrants entering Turkey, maintain a peaceful environment to enable a political process in the future, and deny "terrorist" organizations—referring to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from taking advantage of opportunities created by such conflicts.

6

Humanitarian Updates

Northwest Syria

The Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) indicated that five tents in Afrin's Tal camp were partially damaged due to torrential rains. The statement added that one tent in the Sheikh Sayyah Camp sheltering earthquake-affected displaced people was also damaged. It is worth noting that in mid-November 2023, 58 IDP camps were damaged due to torrential rains, marking the beginning of a recurring issue faced by IDPs.

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Economy and Markets

South and Central Syria

A professor at Damascus University's Faculty of Economics, Dr. Shafiq Arabash, told media outlets that fuel prices in Syria are approximately 20% higher than global prices. He noted that one of the reasons behind this phenomenon is that oil refining in Syria is not up to global standards, partly due to the refineries being outdated. Meanwhile, he also added that Syria's consumption of gasoline is about 50% less than the consumption prior to the crisis.

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Criminality

M5 Highway

Government forces reportedly arrested a number of employees working at the Nasib Border crossing who were reportedly forging import licenses as they were on the M5 highway. Media outlets indicated that forged customs declarations amounted to 10 million USD. Media outlets also noted that since December 2023, around 80 employees working at the crossing were arrested, while several others managed to flee Syria before their warrants were issued. Those caught were reportedly forced to resign and pay fines estimated at millions of SYP.

22

Services

Northeast Syria

Multiple locations: An AANES official told media outlets that they are trying to connect electricity generators to water stations to pump water to residents in Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli after Turkey's recent aerial attacks cut off electricity to most water stations in both areas. However, officials also noted that diesel shortages compound the issue further, forcing them to ration electricity production.

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Politics and policy

Northwest Syria

Multiple locations: HTS reportedly began a new campaign of arrests on the orders of its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani. According to media outlets, the campaign is targeting military and security leaders who are charged with carrying out torture and fabricating charges against those who have recently been released and acquitted of "espionage" claims. These arrests come as part of efforts of HTS leadership to satisfy those released and calm the tense atmosphere within HTS-controlled areas.

Cover image: Workers drill for a water well in Maaret Tamsrin in the northern Idleb countryside. (Source: [Syria Direct](#))

Executive summary

The 21st session of the Astana process convened in late January in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. Representatives from Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Syrian government, and the Syrian Interim Government participated. Although the meeting fell short of achieving a definitive resolution to the Syrian crisis, it provided a platform for involved parties to deliberate on outstanding issues and reiterate their commitment to de-escalation in Syria. In January, the United States initiated a series of airstrikes targeting facilities and infrastructure controlled by Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. This action was in response to a drone attack that resulted in the death of three U.S. soldiers at the Tower 22 military outpost in Jordan. The strikes, hitting seven different locations, inflicted substantial material damage. However, they failed to dissuade Iran-backed militias from persisting in their offensive activities.

In the southern and central regions of Syria, numerous civilians in As-Sweida lost their lives in an alleged Jordanian airstrike targeting hideouts of narcotic smugglers. This incident prompted local armed groups to extend an offer to assist Jordanian authorities in combating cross-border narcotics smuggling within Syria. The response from Jordan remains uncertain, and the feasibility of these groups undertaking such a formidable task is unclear. Further, Syrian 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. Furthermore, penalties for illegal exchange or monetary transfer operations were heightened, and the Central Bank enhanced its oversight over the monetary transfer sector.

In northeast Syria, on December 12, the General Council of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) ratified an updated version of the social contract initially drafted in 2016. This new social contract delineates the relationship between AANES (and the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF) vis-à-vis Damascus, branding both as integral components of the "Democratic Republic of Syria." The Social Democratic Council (SDC) held its fourth conference in late December, appointing Mahmoud al-Meslat and Layla Qarman as Co-Chairs. Al-Meslat's appointment, reportedly endorsed by Washington, aims to achieve various goals, including appeasing Arab tribes.

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 until July 13. This extension followed the expiration of the previous authorization. Simultaneously, the suspension of major water pumping projects to Idleb City by an international organization due to insufficient funds led to a water supply crisis. In northern Aleppo, teachers organized protests in early December, advocating for salary increases to cope with living costs. Leaks of an unapproved draft law on Public Morals from the Syrian Salvation Government's Ministry of Interior surfaced in media outlets. This draft law, comprising 128 articles, prohibits specific practices in public spaces and both public and private workplaces. It also mandates the creation of a "Public Morals Police" (PMP) tasked with enforcing the law. A forthcoming report by CA-SYR will delve into the factors influencing the potential adoption and implementation of this draft law and the role of the PMP.

International

Astana process seeks to ensure continued de-escalation

US retaliates against Iran-backed militias' attack on Tower 22

South and Central

Local groups combat narcotics trade in southern Syria's As-Sweida

Syrian government imposes restrictions on foreign currency transactions

Northeast Syria

Turning the Page? Policy and Leadership Changes in AANES-held Areas

Northwest Syria

Syrian government extends aid deliveries via Bab Al-Hawa for six months

End of water pumping to Idleb City

Teachers' protests underline broader socio-economic concerns in northern Aleppo

Public Morality Draft Law in SSG-held areas

Economic Indicators

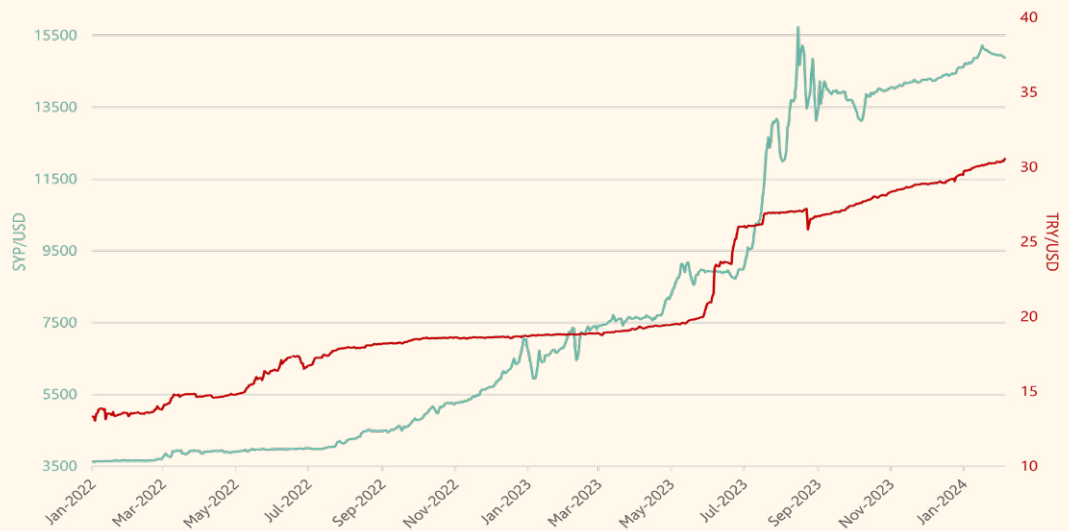
Economic indicator 1.

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

	November 2023	December 2023	January 2024
SYP/USD official exchange rate	12,600	12,600	13,200
SYP/USD parallel market rate	14,163.90 (3.2%)	14,386.30 (1.6%)	14,921.00 (3.7%)
TRY/USD official rate	28.70 (2.9%)	29.10 (1.4%)	30.10 (3.4%)

Economic indicator 2.

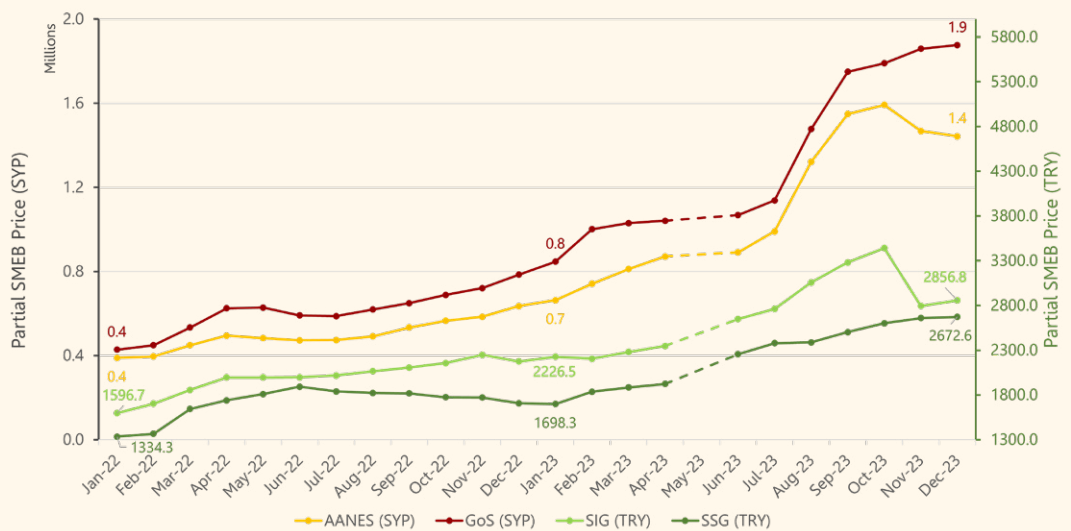
SYP/USD and TRY/USD exchange rates



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

Astana process seeks to ensure continued de-escalation

The continued Astana process, held in late January, once again failed to achieve its intended goal or bring the Syrian conflict closer to a resolution but rather continued to serve as a platform where the concerned parties agreed on continued de-escalation as regional tensions run high. The [Astana process' 21st session](#) was held on 24 and 25 January in Kazakhstan's capital city of Astana. The Kazakh government disregarded its [previous announcement to end the process](#) and agreed to host the meeting again following a [consensual agreement](#) by all concerned parties to reconvene. [Representatives](#) from Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Syrian government, and the Syrian Interim Government, along with representatives from Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, attended the meeting. The representatives met over the course of two days and [discussed the situation](#) in the de-escalation zone in Idleb, combatting terrorism, Syrian-Turkish relations, and the humanitarian situation in Gaza, among other topics. [Bilateral meetings also took place](#) amongst the attendees themselves and between the [Deputy Special Envoy of the UN to Syria, Najat Roshdi](#), and the representatives of Iraq, Iran, and the Syrian opposition.

Joint statement provides no concrete steps for settlement

The 21st session's [concluding joint statement](#) reaffirmed the process' importance in finding a lasting settlement, expressed the participants' conviction to follow a political process in line with UN resolution 2254, and acknowledged the Syrian Constitutional Committee's important role and the need for it to pursue its activities. However, the statement only paid lip service to these processes and once again failed to outline tangible steps to reach a final settlement. The participants also condemned Israeli airstrikes, stated their recognition of Syrian unity and sovereignty, and expressed concern over the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Concerned parties interested in continued de-escalation

The statement confirmed doubts about whether the process could reach its [intended goal](#) at this time. The Syrian crisis' growing complexity, the obstinance of domestic actors, and the escalation in the region make it difficult for the different parties to agree on such a matter. Instead, the meetings served as a platform to agree on continued de-escalation, particularly in the northwest, at a time of heightened tensions in the region. De-escalation is likely in the interests of all the concerned parties as they are preoccupied with other important matters. [Russia is still waging a tough war](#) in Ukraine and now must help prevent the [war in Gaza from spilling over](#). Iran is currently engaged in a tug-of-war with the United States through its proxies in the broader Middle East. Turkey has previously [declared its intention to maintain calm](#) and avert clashes between the Syrian government and opposition, mainly to prevent new waves of refugees. Despite its failure to achieve its intended goal, Astana's continuity is important because it is one of the only spaces left for the concerned parties to discuss a lasting political solution to the Syrian conflict at a time when others, such as the constitutional committee, have [suspended their work indefinitely](#).

US retaliates against Iran-backed militias' attack on Tower 22

At the risk of further embroiling the region in conflict, a series of retaliatory airstrikes conducted in late January by the US have failed to deter continued attacks launched by Iran-backed militias with implications on other Syrian actors and complicating local security dynamics. In retaliation for a [drone attack on Tower 22](#), a US military outpost in Jordan, that killed three US soldiers, [US forces conducted a series of strikes](#) on 2 February against Iran-backed militias throughout Iraq and Syria. The [US Department of Defense](#) said that their strikes “included more than 85 targets across seven facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force.” The [targeted facilities included](#) logistical and command and control centers, weapons and ammunition warehouses, and intelligence facilities, according to the US. The US later emphasized that the strikes ‘[will not be the last](#)’ and that the US ‘[will respond](#)’ if and when its forces are attacked. US Central Command later stated on 8 February that it [killed a Kataeb Hezbollah commander](#), Abu Bakr al-Sa’di, in Iraq for perpetrating the attack on Tower 22.

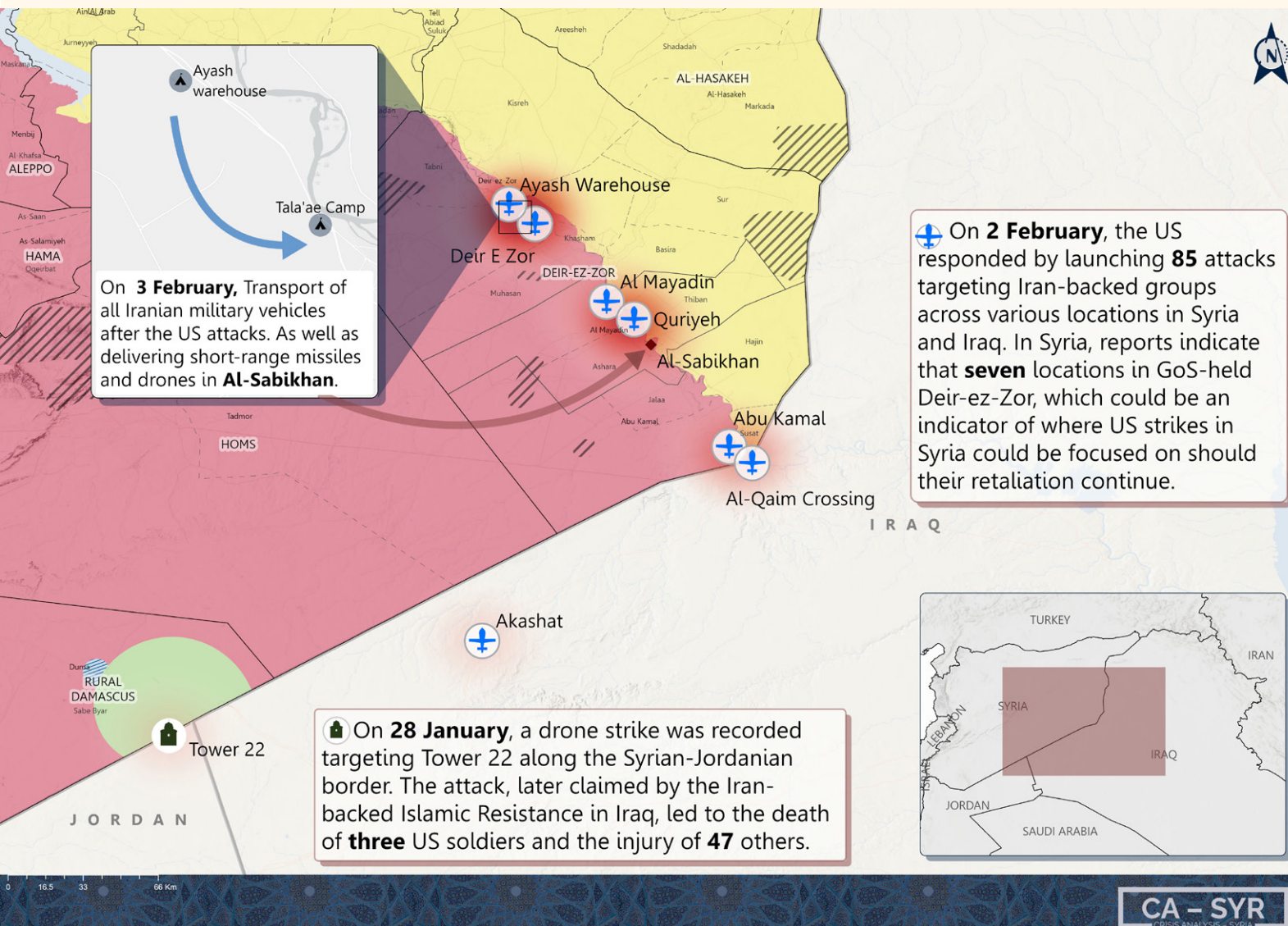


Image 1: Map showing the locations of US retaliatory strikes against Iran-backed militias

Iran-backed militia attacks decrease following US strikes

Many Iran-backed militias expressed their intent to de-escalate following the attack on Tower 22. Hussein al-Mosawi, the spokesperson for Harakat al-Nujaba, told media sources following the airstrikes, [that the group does not](#) “want to escalate or widen regional tensions,” while [Kataeb Hezbollah announced](#) “the suspension of military and security operations” against US forces. However, the US strikes failed to deter all Iran-backed militias from continuing their attacks against US forces in the region. Given that these militias are understood to have a [decentralized command structure](#), many decisions are independent from one another. This reality led other Iran-backed militias to continue their attacks against US forces: in the days following, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella term for Iran-backed militias, announced that it conducted drone attacks against International Coalition’s [Khrab al-Jir](#) and [al-Omar oil field](#) military bases in Syria on 3 and 4 February, respectively. However, despite the Iran-backed militia attacks in early February, the overall number decreased following the retaliatory airstrikes; the attacks carried out by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, after 5 February largely targeted Israeli interests, such as areas in the [vicinity of the Dead Sea](#) and the [Gulf of Aqaba port city of Eilat](#).

Iranian militia attacks heighten tensions with the SDF

Attacks conducted by Iran-backed militias are risking further complicating local security dynamics by threatening to ignite clashes with the SDF. The SDF is the International Coalition’s (IC) local partner and ground forces leading the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in northeast Syria. This partnership, in addition to the IC training the SDF, has led the SDF to have joint military bases with the IC. The drone attack conducted by Iran-backed militias on al-Omar oil on 4 February hit the special forces academy located on the base, [killing six SDF combatants](#). The SDF conducted an [investigation into the incident](#) and determined that the drone was launched by Iran-backed militias located in Deir-ez-Zor. Saleh Muslim, head of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), [warned Iran-backed militias against conducting](#) any future attacks against the SDF or they will have to “respond very forcefully.” Tensions had already been high between the SDF and Iran-backed militias in late 2023 after [the latter supported an insurgency led by Arab tribes](#) against SDF forces. Any future mishap could result in clashes between both sides, further complicating security dynamics in the northeast.

South and Central

Local groups combat narcotics trade in southern Syria's As-Sweida

In an alleged Jordanian cross-border counter-narcotics operation, civilian deaths in the As-Sweida governorate prompted local armed groups to offer their assistance to Jordanian authorities to prevent a similar incident from reoccurring. Over at least the past two months, Harakat Rijal al-Karama (HRK), As-Sweida's prominent local armed group, had been conducting anti-narcotics operations on its own, [arresting more than 30 people](#) involved in the cross-border narcotics trade from southern Syria into Jordan. The offer made to Jordan was motivated by the death of As-Sweida residents in a series of [alleged Jordanian airstrikes on 18 January](#), targeting what was reported to be residential buildings in the southern As-Sweida countryside. The airstrikes were meant to target hideouts and assembly points of organized criminal groups involved in the narcotics trade, but [instead killed ten civilians](#), mostly women and children. Residents say that they are now [living in constant fear](#) of being mistakenly targeted by an airstrike.

While HRK seemingly has a vested interest in fighting the narcotics trade, it is uncertain what Jordan's answer will be, whether these groups will have the capacity, and how the Syrian government will view a local group openly coordinating with a foreign government inside Syria. Regardless, HRK made their offer through [a nine-point proposal](#). In the proposal, the HRK offered to cooperate with the Jordanian authorities, requesting cooperation, including that Jordan provide a list of names of people wanted for their involvement in the narcotics trade.

HRK also made it clear that they wish to expand their anti-narcotics operations despite the [objections of local stakeholders](#). They requested that community and religious leaders cooperate with them in their endeavors by denying criminal groups any protection and assisting in their arrest. On 26 January, HRK combatants [conducted an operation](#) in Thibeen town at the request of its community leaders, overrunning smuggler hideouts, arresting six smugglers, and forcing the rest to flee. While community acceptance for such operations, under the current circumstances, could give them more leeway to operate, the HRK's possibly limited capacity and the Syrian government's opposition could be obstacles to expanding the HRK's anti-narcotics operations.

Narcotics smugglers: A national security threat

Narcotics smugglers have gradually become a national security threat for Jordan, as narcotics operations increase and smugglers become more emboldened. Smugglers have taken advantage of [poor weather conditions](#) and low visibility to move narcotics across the border more frequently, with [more than five attempts](#) taking place in one week. The smugglers have also become a security threat as [they are heavily armed](#), carrying rifles, machine guns, anti-tank weapons, and [other equipment](#). On 12 December, one Jordanian soldier was killed after clashing with armed smugglers on the border. This threat has forced the Jordanian military to take increasingly aggressive measures to combat smuggling, with the rhetorical, logistical, and [material support](#) of the US. The Jordanian military [modified their rules of engagement](#), [increased their presence](#) along the border, [sent threats](#), clashed with smugglers, and [conducted raids](#)

and [airstrikes](#) against their locations inside Syria. Despite these measures, smugglers have become more aggressive and their operations more frequent.

Jordan could resort to partnering with local groups

Jordan has struggled to find an effective partner on the Syrian side of the border to take decisive action against the narcotics trade but could look to local armed groups to help. Both [Russia](#) and the [Syrian government](#) have failed in this endeavor despite pledges they had to keep armed groups associated with the narcotics trade – many of which are understood to be Iran-backed militias – out of southern Syria and crack down on criminal groups engaged in narcotics smuggling.

Partnering with local armed groups could be a viable option for Jordanian authorities. This could potentially lessen the need for airstrikes and other coercive measures conducted inside Syria that could damage their relationship with local communities and potentially backfire. The 18 January airstrikes were [condemned by residents](#) during a large protest in As-Sweida city. HRK also requested that Jordanian authorities [take the necessary precautions](#) to avoid “damaging the historical relations” between both sides.

Local groups that have converging interests in combating the narcotics trade could be potential allies. HRK already conducts anti-narcotics operations in As-Sweida, with local sources claiming that they are doing so to curb domestic narcotic consumption in the governorate’s communities. Another group conducting anti-narcotics operations is the Syria Free Army based in al-Tanf. The group states that, with the support of US forces, it [conducts operations](#) against smugglers, confiscating their shipments and destroying them. The group’s leader, Farid al-Qassem, even [claimed that his group](#) is already coordinating with Jordan to combat narcotics smuggling in the border region.

Jordan’s potential partnership with local armed groups could prove to be a quandary for the Syrian government. As-Sweida enjoyed a quasi-autonomous status throughout the war as the majority of its inhabitants chose to remain neutral during the conflict, a stance largely adopted by the Druze minority. This enabled local armed groups like HRK to uneasily coexist with government forces in As-Sweida and allowed them to operate as a de facto police and protector of the local communities in the governorate. However, cooperation and potential empowerment by Jordan could be an act that the government cannot condone, forcing it to view the HRK as a local agent for a foreign nation. Without explicit (whether covert or public) permission from Damascus, cooperation on this issue between the HRK and Jordan could also be seen as a violation of the Syrian government’s sovereignty, perhaps reminiscent of previous tensions between Damascus and Amman, given the latter’s [facilitation of opposition groups](#) in southern Syria in years past.

As-Sweida is being pushed to be self-reliant in security

The local context and the government’s continued inability and/or unwillingness to assume its border security responsibilities forces As-Sweida residents to seek self-reliance. Following the economic decline last year, [As-Sweida residents protested](#) the government’s economic mismanagement and inability to sufficiently provide basic services. This led to calls for a [civil administration](#) to run the governorate’s affairs and, later, the [closure of several Baath party offices](#). While no alternative overt governing body has appeared in the governorate, it seems that the current context has now forced local armed groups to assume greater responsibility for maintaining security. Aside from HRK’s anti-narcotics operations, other armed groups have coordinated with the HRK and are [now conducting armed patrols](#) in their own areas to stop crime and the increasing security instability.

Syrian government imposes restrictions on foreign currency transactions

On 20 January, President Bashar al-Assad issued decree 5/2024 pertaining to foreign currency transactions, effectively restricting foreign currency transactions and increasing its control over the exchange and monetary transfer (hawala) sectors, potentially to the detriment of the Syrian economy.¹ The decree prohibits residents from using foreign currency and precious metals in financial transactions and the advertisement of products and services for sale in those currencies. According to clause 1A of the decree, the following punishments can be exacted on any party dealing with foreign currency:

- Up to \$10,000: Imprisonment from one to three years
- Between \$10,000 and \$50,000: Imprisonment (note: the decree mentions 'imprisonment' for this amount but does not specify the number of years)
- More than \$50,000: Imprisonment for at least seven years

Those tried under decree 5/2024 will have to pay a fine that is double the amount of confiscated foreign currency or the items and services offered for sale in said currencies. For example, local sources stated that if a trader is caught conducting an unlicensed foreign currency transaction amounting to \$20,000, the court could force him to pay a fine of \$40,000 to avoid imprisonment.

Measures to increase control over monetary transfer sector

The government also enacted measures to increase control and oversight over the hawala sector. Assad also issued [decree 6/2024](#), increasing the punishment for those engaging in unlicensed exchange and hawala operations.² Those caught committing the crime now have to spend between five and ten years in prison and pay a 25 million SYP fine. Those convicted also must pay three times the amount of money confiscated and uncovered transactions.

Media sources reported that the Central Bank is increasingly [monitoring transactions](#) conducted by licensed hawalas to verify the identity of the recipients. Hawala offices are reportedly sending security camera footage of the individuals receiving the transfers along with their transaction data to the Central Bank. Media sources noted that customers “feel like they are criminal suspects,” with local sources stating that they are often asked about their relationship with the sender and the purpose of the transaction. Traders who are sending transfers of over 1 million SYP are required to provide their commercial license to the hawala offices.

Local sources claimed these measures have been in place for the past two years, but added that the information-sharing process between the Central Bank and the hawalas was recently automated. On 22 January, the government [decreased the limit for daily monetary transfers](#) conducted within Syria from five to one million SYP for one week. Local sources stated that the decrease took place to free up resources and capacity to electronically link the hawala databases and security footage to the Central

1 The decree nullified previous decrees 54/2013 and [3/2020](#), which address the same subject

2 Decree 6/2024 amended law [24/2006](#). The punishment for conducting unlicensed hawala and exchange operations used to be imprisonment between six months and one year in addition to a 1 million SYP fine.

Bank, giving them direct access and a live feed, which reduced the waiting time for that information to be periodically submitted. The government opted to reduce the limit instead of stopping the transfers to mitigate the disruption of domestic monetary circulation and local economies.

Increased scrutiny and control to deal with low foreign currency availability

The recent measures enacted by the government are not particularly novel and are perhaps a standard component in response to low foreign currency availability in its coffers and the Syrian market. The government implemented similar measures in early 2020 after approximately 40 billion USD belonging to Syrian residents were trapped due to the collapse of the Lebanese banking system in October 2019. The government lost Lebanon as a major foreign currency avenue, leading it to implement restrictions on foreign currency transactions and other measures to control the flow of money in and outside the country. The recent measures came after the Syrian pound's depreciation neared 15,000 SYP in mid-January following severe [economic deterioration in 2023](#). It is possible that the government enacted these measures to siphon foreign currency from traders and hawala offices to help stabilize the falling pound and reinvigorate an old method of filling its coffers.

The continued implementation of these restrictions for the past four years means that the status quo is likely to continue under the new decrees and is unlikely to impact humanitarian organizations directly since it mainly concerns economic actors – unless there is a specific onus by Damascus to increase control and oversight over donor-funded programming. These laws, however, could contribute to price increases, making humanitarian programming and operations increasingly more expensive, particularly if [IMTA transfers are directly affected substantially](#). Local sources stated that many traders are finding the fines excessive, with many going bankrupt after being accused of violations. This could dissuade many from engaging in import operations, leading to a drop in market supply and consequent price increases.

Northeast Syria

Turning the Page? Policy and Leadership Changes in AANES-held Areas

On 12 December, the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria's [General Council](#) approved the ratified version of the social contract, a document to set forth laws, regulatory rules, and administrative references, that was originally drafted in 2016. The original version of the social contract was [routinely criticized](#), most notably for allegedly having been drafted hastily and with limited participation. In 2021, the Autonomous Administration [announced the creation](#) of a 150-person committee to review the then-existing social contract and then elected a 30-member committee tasked with re-writing the social contract, which was ultimately [ratified on 12 December](#).

The amendments, while not groundbreaking, now form a ratified governance document. Two key points emerge: First, the announcement may signal a conditional pathway for NES-Damascus reconciliation. The Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria renamed itself to the "Democratic Autonomous Administration in Syria's North and East Region" (Autonomous Administration hereinafter). The new social contract also defines the relationship between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces vis-a-vis Damascus, referring to the Autonomous Administration and the SDF as part of the "Democratic Republic of Syria," a name not previously articulated and is perhaps a broad ambition for negotiations with Damascus. Consequently, these efforts may signify efforts to solidify control and position within a potentially more federalized, decentralized Syria, both politically and militarily; Article 72 calls for national defense participation, while Article 111 assigns the SDF to defend Autonomous Administration-held and all Syrian lands against external threats.

Second, the social contract addresses relations with Arab tribes, emphasizing judicial processes and rights while employing inclusive language. However, the practical implementation of this rhetoric remains unclear. The social contract perhaps attempts to address the fraught relationship with many tribes in NES, ensuring that judicial processes and rights are stipulated and/or reinforced. The contract also leverages notably inclusive language that transcends ethnicity, language, and origin; however, it is not clear how exactly this rhetoric is to be put into practice.

The key change is the rebranding of areas under Autonomous Administration control as the "North East Syria Region," replacing Kurdish nomenclature such as 'al-Jazira.' The new social contract organizes AANES-held areas into seven districts, simplifying administrative structures, namely: al-Jazira (combining Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli), Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, al-Furat (combining Ain Al Arab and Tell Abiad), Menbij, Afrin and Shahba, and Al-Thawrah (also known as Tabqa). This change [aligns with earlier expectations](#) and does not signal a complete overhaul of governance structures.

The amendments also entail renaming the General Council to the Peoples' Council and establishing the Court to Protect the Social Contract. This court is mandated with interpreting social contract texts and ensuring alignment with laws issued by the Peoples' Council and executive bodies. There were some changes within governance structures, particularly those related to Municipalities. [Quoting officials](#), media outlets reported that the Autonomous Administration's Municipalities Commission will be

removed. Instead, Municipalities will now have to organize themselves in a union. The impact, whether positive or negative, of this change remains to be seen.

SDC Appoints New Co-Chairs

On 20 and 21 December, the Social Democratic Council (SDC) held its [fourth conference](#), appointing [two new Co-Chairs](#) and introducing a [change in its governance structure](#). Mahmoud al-Meslat and Layla Qarman were both sworn in as Co-Chairs of the SDC, while also removing the position of Head of the SDC Executive Committee held by the influential Ilham Ahmad, who had been in the position since 2015. [Established in 2015](#), the SDC is a [political umbrella](#) aimed to provide representation for the SDF and political parties in Autonomous Administration-held areas. The SDC generally emphasizes the importance of an [intra-Syrian resolution](#) achieved via dialogue and direct negotiations in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254. The conference's closing statement also [stressed the importance](#) of a Syrian–Syrian dialogue.



Image 2: Layla Qarman and Mahmoud al-Meslat following their election in December 2023. (Source: [North Press Agency](#))

Born in a village near Afrin, Qarman is a career Kurdish politician who has been active in AANES-held areas since 2012. Her first notable activity was the “Women Center for Education and Intellect” in Aleppo and Afrin aimed at capacitating female leaders, before moving to Lebanon and serving as the head of foreign relations for the Star Conference.¹ She later returned to Syria and began working with the SDC in 2018, serving as deputy Co-Chair. While known to have joined the Syria Future Party in 2020, pro-opposition media outlets allege that [Qarman has affiliations](#) with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and maintained a low profile despite being an influential figure.

Al-Meslet is from the Arab al-Jabour tribe, originally from Al-Hasakeh. A PhD holder and professor of Middle East studies at Ohio University and Oberlin University, al-Meslet [previously headed](#) the opposition-affiliated Syrian National Council’s (SNA) [foreign](#)

¹ The [Star Conference](#) (also known as Kongra Star) originally emerged in 2004 as an underground movement in North and East Syria. It aims to advance women’s freedom and democratic principles.

[relations office](#) in the US and Canada. Media outlets claim that al-Meslet's victory was largely [backed by Washington](#) and its aims to counterbalance government and Iranian influence in the region while also attempting to appease Arab tribes and empower an 'acceptable' figure for Turkey within the SDC. Following al-Meslet's election, activists shared a photo of the [new SDC leader meeting Erdogan](#), extending his congratulations on Erdogan's recent Turkish presidential election victory in May 2023. Al-Meslet also hails from the same tribe as Salem al-Meslet, who, until [September 2023](#), was the head of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces.

Determining the accuracy of assertions regarding the US's efforts to pacify Turkey through support for figures like al-Meslet is challenging. However, in an [interview on 27 December](#), al-Meslet indicated his willingness to open a dialogue with Turkey, claiming that his tribe had year-long relations with the Turkish state. Similarly, in what could indicate his appointment being an attempt to appease tribes, he also emphasized the role of tribes, particularly his own, in maintaining stability in the region. In line with the conference's closing statement, al-Meslet also stressed the importance of a Syrian–Syrian dialogue noting that the SDC has an 'open-door policy' for all Syrians. Al-Meslet also [rebuked circulating rumors](#) that the new social contract is a first move to set a separatist project into motion.

A Real Turning Point?

With a new social contract and a cabinet reshuffle, the SDC and AANES are likely attempting to address crucial issues that could impact the future of Autonomous Administration-held areas. These issues, amid many others such as service provision, include its relations with internal actors (primarily Arab tribes) and external actors (namely Turkey and Damascus). The SDC and AANES are likely to encounter substantial obstacles and will need considerable time – and measures to restore (or establish) trust and faith in multiple actors, some of which are at odds with the Syrian conflict – to achieve their objectives.

Some points of criticism in the previous version of the social contract also remain present. For instance, [media outlets noted](#) that arbitrary arrests were not banned in the previous version in an issue identified by multiple sources as being a direct driver of discontent and friction towards the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Autonomous Administration amid a flurry of reports indicating that this is an ongoing issue in Autonomous Administration-held areas. While this was not directly addressed in the new social contract, Article 56 states that "everyone has the right to a fair trial," and Article 57 stipulates that "it is not permissible to arrest, enter, or search private places, or residential homes, except by judicial permission or in cases of where crime is directly being witnessed." It will, therefore, be critical to see how this language is put into practice, particularly in southern Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor, and eastern Ar-Raqqa governorates, areas with substantial dissenting (and, at times, uprising) Arab populations and continued speculations of ISIS presence.

Anticipating al-Meslet's success is challenging and requires time for a clearer assessment; however, initial indications suggest a challenging journey ahead. Following the early October Ankara attacks (later claimed by the PKK) that led to Turkish retaliation in Iraq and Syria, another [alleged PKK attack](#) in Iraq killed six Turkish soldiers on 12 January, thus spurring more retaliation. Similarly, [sporadic attacks](#) and clashes between [the SDF and Arab Tribal Forces](#) have continued throughout January, while pro-government media outlets continue to demonize the social contract, calling it and the SDF a "separatist project."

Northwest Syria

Syrian government extends aid deliveries via Bab Al-Hawa for six months

On 11 January, the Syrian government [extended its permission](#) for the UN to use the Bab Al-Hawa crossing to deliver humanitarian assistance to northwest Syria for an additional period of six months, ending on 13 July 2024. The new permission, a renewal of the 'consent model' between the UN and Damascus, was provided upon the expiration of the [previous authorization](#) that the Syrian government granted for the



Image 3: Winter's impact in IDP camps in northwest Syria. (Source: [Syrian Civil Defense](#))

UN to use Bab Al-Hawa for six months beginning in July 2023, when the UNSC failed to extend the January 2023 [UNSC resolution 2672](#). At the time, the UN described the [Syrian government's conditions as unacceptable](#) yet continued to negotiate, ultimately reaching a [modified consent model](#), on 7 August 2023, based on the previously [disseminated note verbale](#) between the UN and Damascus. At the time, the Humanitarian Action Coordination Office (HAC) in Idlib stated that the entry of UN aid convoys resumed on 19 September after HAC authorization of the UN to use Bab Al-Hawa crossing "[independently](#)" until the end of 2023. The HAC is commonly perceived to be an extension of the SSG, despite the absence of an evidenced link between the two entities.

In addition to the renewal of the Bab Al-Hawa crossing permission, two additional crossings, Bab Al-Salameh and Ar-Ra'ee in northern Aleppo, were also [authorized by the Syrian government](#) for cross-border aid delivery as an immediate measure in response to the 2023 earthquakes until mid-February. On 12 February, the Syrian government also

[extended the use of these two crossings](#) for another three months until 13 May. As the timing suggests, the permission of the three crossings continues to be out of sync, both in terms of permission granted by Damascus and the duration of validity.

of humanitarian trucks [crossing into northwest](#) Syria from Turkey, 1-25 Jan

Bab Al-Hawa	Bab Al-Salamah	Ar-Ra'ee	Total
42	1	0	43
# of trucks between 12 and 25 Jan			
5	1	0	6

The HAC position of the Syrian government involvement

The HAC's [September 2023 statement](#) regarding the reauthorization does not recognize the Syrian government's central role in the matter. HAC stated that they authorize the UN to use Bab al-Hawa 'independently' as a rhetorical marker of their refusal of any Syrian government role in the process. This time, after the UN announced the Syrian government's decision to reauthorize Bab al-Hawa for cross-border aid deliveries, the HAC tacitly acquiesced to the consent model by stating that the UN "informed" them of the decision. The HAC's statement neither mentioned the Syrian government nor the fact that permission to use Bab al-Hawa is based on an agreement between the UN and the Syrian government. The HAC could be refusing to mention the Syrian government in its statement because, aside from possible political motivations, it is not directly involved in the implementation process. The HAC's September statement can thus be seen as a recognition of the status quo and, as mentioned previously, tacit acquiescence.

The Syrian government's reauthorization was announced with minimal (public) consternation and a degree of timeliness, announced immediately after the deadline had passed, indicating that neither conflict nor negotiations had to precede it. The lack of outward-facing posturing over the January 2024 extension could be seen as an olive branch towards Turkey, which [insists on the need](#) for aid to continue entering northwestern Syria, to keep the lines of communication open and potentially revisit the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement; while Russia has previously stated that the rapprochement process [collapsed at the end of 2023](#), there nonetheless continues to be interest in [encouraging a diplomatic breakthrough](#).

Rapprochement aside, and perhaps most significantly, reauthorization of the consent model reaffirms a semblance of Syria's sovereignty over the Bab al-Hawa crossing, which may give the Syrian government the ability to impose conditions for an extension next July. If increased conditionality is imposed, it will cause complexities for the humanitarian community - particularly implementers reliant on UN convoys - due to concerns over principled aid delivery from Damascus.

The Impact of winter on northwest Syria

Since the beginning of 2024, torrential rainstorms and snow have impacted many communities, especially IDP camps. As of 10 February, the Response Coordination Group (RCG) documented that over [134,000 IDPs were impacted](#) due to the weather conditions: 412 IDP camps, 22% of the total number in northwest Syria were impacted by flooding, collapsed and otherwise destroyed tents, and fires caused by unsafe or unsuitable heating elements.

Coupled with a lack of sustainable options for income, the drop in temperatures has required many households to search for more affordable heating materials such as plastic, coal, and locally refined fuel. Though not a novel trend, these unhealthy and unsafe materials led to over 60 fires breaking out in houses and camps across northwest Syria, from camps in Kherbet Eljoz in western Idleb to IDP camps in northern rural Aleppo, leading to the [death of seven individuals](#) and the injury of 32 since the beginning of 2024. Similar fires were recorded in areas surrounding Idleb city, Ma'araat Tamasrin, Kelly, Harbanoush, Kafrehmul, Hazano, and Zardana. Every year, the population in the northwest is exposed to similar harsh winter conditions; this year, the degree of need is likely to have increased given the decrease in humanitarian resources, particularly given the [64% shortfall](#) compared to the 2023 appeal for the humanitarian response plan.

End of water pumping to Idleb City



Image 4: The Al Arshani water station, west of Idleb City, sustained damage in January 2022 after alleged Russian airstrikes. Source: [Orient News](#)

After announcing its [eventual suspension](#) due to a lack of funding, on 31 December, a major water pumping project providing water to Idleb City, managed by an international organization, [was suspended](#). As an outcome, water pumping stopped for the first two weeks of 2024, causing a major water crisis in the city and an [increase in demand by 600%](#) for water trucking and wells exploitation. Though the price of a cubic meter of water has not changed despite increased well-pumping hours (and thus costs), according to well owners, [water trucks raised the price](#) of one tank of water from 50 to 75 TRY due to the high demand. Waiting periods for

water trucking also increased for consumers, given the sudden decrease in supply.

The Idleb City water pumping project also provided water to the surrounding villages of Martein, Ein Martein, Sijer–Bqesemto, Bshmaron, Arshani, Qabi and Kherbit Al-Nantour, by managing three main pumping stations: Sijer, Old Seijr and Bshmaron, all northwest of Idleb city. These three stations provided Idleb City with [two-thirds of demand](#), roughly equating to 11 thousand cubic meters of drinking water per day for slightly less than half a million people. The remaining amounts are reportedly provided by other stations in the city, also operated by other organizations and perhaps susceptible to donor funding volatility.

The Director of Studies at the SSG General Directorate for Drinking Water stated that after they were [informed of the water pumping suspension](#), studies were prepared to identify supplemental support, adding that the Directorate is unable to cover the pumping costs without donor-funded support. The Directorate also assumed control over the three water pumping stations and announced that it would [attempt to re-operationalize](#) water distribution. On 16 January, the Directorate started the pumping process according to a published table of water distribution for Idleb neighborhoods, circulated daily; it is unclear, however, if this has resumed at full capacity or if a rationing cycle has been implemented. Resuming water pumping helped partially alleviate the crisis, but the demand for water trucking is still high due to the delay in pumping to each neighborhood.

Though the directorate currently bears all the pumping costs, it may resort to sharing the costs via taxation or fees in a proportion that has not been determined. According to the director of the General Directorate for Drinking Water, the directorate is [considering installing water meters](#) to monitor consumption, but such an endeavor will require time and resources to complete. Facilitation of cross-border aid entry is crucial amid a general decrease in funding, in particular (though not exclusively) to soften the impact of continually deteriorating socio-economic conditions and a decrease in funding from donor governments. As such, the reauthorization of Bab al-Hawa is a welcomed reprieve, as residents hypothetically can reallocate resources towards other basic necessities, such as increasingly expensive and scarce water.

Teachers' protests underline broader socio-economic concerns in northern Aleppo

On 7 December 2023, teachers in the cities and towns of northern Aleppo [organized protests](#) demanding authorities to increase teachers' salaries. Educators currently earn 1,925 TRY (€50) per month, which is largely based on a Turkish grant; teachers believe that the sum is insufficient to cope with living costs.

The protests began at the [invitation of the Free Syrian Teachers Syndicate](#). The Syndicate Published a statement highlighting the deterioration taking place in the education sector: low resourcing for educational materials and institutions, increased numbers of students per classroom, and a high drop-out percentage. The statement also stressed the lack of an active role on behalf of the education directorate in developing and managing the education sector in northern Aleppo, particularly given the Turkish role in overseeing the education sector in SIG-controlled areas; [after it was revealed](#) that donor governments provide the Turkish authorities with €300 per teacher as a salary, compared to the €50 in salary provided to educators, many resigned.

In an attempt to defuse tensions, teacher salaries were raised to 2,390 TRY (an approximate 24% increase, \$80, or around €74) by the Turkish authorities through the local councils. However, the increase was [considered disrespectful](#) compared to the initial teachers' demand of a raise of at least 200%. On 9 January, the Teachers Syndicate issued a statement calling on an intervention by international organizations to support teacher salaries and bolster the governance of the education sector. The statement mentioned that the Turkish authorities have often rejected similar demands, considering it a sector it would rather international organizations not interfere in.

Protests extended to dissatisfied sectors in Northern Aleppo

As of 12 February, education protests are still ongoing. The discontent of teachers – joined by other professional syndicates – has led to several parties calling for a [central demonstration](#) at the Bab al-Salamah crossing on 16 February, including the Teachers Syndicate and the Drivers and Land Transport Syndicate. The purpose of the sit-in, according to the social media posts, is an improvement in living conditions and increased security, particularly in IDP camps.

The stipulations of the sit-in will also purportedly encompass the authorization for [Syrian trucks and drivers](#) to transport and distribute goods in northern Aleppo, supplanting the current reliance on Turkish logistics. Such calls and demands are all directly related to the Turkish influence in northern Aleppo and indicate a general sense of dissatisfaction. This demonstration was preceded by several protests with similar demands, the most notable of which was a [14 January sit-in](#) that took place in Al-Bab city, during which demonstrators demanded improvements in living conditions, solutions for the water



Image 5: A sit-in takes place in Al-Bab city on 14 January. (Source: [Syria-TV](#))

crisis in the city, an increase in income, and increased job security. Demands were also made of the Al-Bab Local Council to [reverse its decision](#) to raise bread prices from 3 to 4 TRY per 500-gram bread bag, which was allegedly related to a [reduction in flour subsidies](#) and a rise in production costs.

For their part, teachers in northern Aleppo have been [regularly organizing protests](#) since 2021 due to broad dissatisfaction related to job standards, sectoral governance, and compensation. The previous protests proved that the local councils were unable to provide satisfactory solutions or promises to the teachers in light of clear intransigence on the part of the Turkish authorities, which directly oversees the education sector, in responding to the demands. The Turkish authorities are often seen to be ignoring teachers' and other sectors' demands; in their [most significant response](#), partial solutions are offered and largely do not address primary grievances. Given this approach, it is expected that the authorities responsible for education are unlikely to concede further salary increases, which teachers see as insufficient. [Continued escalatory steps](#) undertaken by teachers create additional pressure both within the education sector and across other professional sectors and are, therefore, likely to continue.

'Public Morality' draft law leaked in SSG-held areas

On 2 January 2024, media outlets leaked a copy of an [unapproved draft law on public morality](#) issued by the Ministry of Interior of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). The draft law is composed of 128 articles that specify, in part, prohibited practices in public spaces, including public and private working places. The draft law mandates the creation of a "Public Morals Police" (PMP) tasked with enforcing its regulations. The draft initiative and the new PMP can be perceived as a modified version of similar initiatives – many of which were scrapped – over the past several years during HTS' and the SSG's control.

One of the primary concerns regarding the draft law is its lack of specificity, which could lead to broad interpretation. This is supposedly the opposite of the main goal of the law: to end the individual (and perhaps subjective) interpretation of Sharia law. This legislation could have significant implications for the living conditions and freedoms of residents in SSG-controlled areas, particularly for females and girls, potentially signaling a reversion to Salafi-based ideologies that SSG and HTS have embodied previously. This change would also depart from their years-long strategy of portraying themselves as a moderate group. The expected implications of the law cannot be determined without exploring the motives behind drafting it and the degree of HTS' intention and capacity to implement it.

During the past few years, the HTS' endeavors have indicated a 'rebranding' by moving away from its Salafi origins to appear more moderate. HTS, as well as the SSG, also [remains cautious](#) about losing its religious connections, which align with the desires of many core supporters, in what could be attempts at [solidifying its legitimacy](#) within the eyes of some constituents to reassure the group that HTS remains committed to its identity. So, the leaked draft law could be seen as a pragmatic approach to appease constituents rather than a shift in strategy.

In addition to doubts about the intent to implement the draft law, there are also operational aspects that render the full implementation of this draft law doubtful. The Ministry of the Interior needs large resources to be able to finance a new PMP across all SSG-held areas, or the SSG will need to completely overhaul its financial management

and reallocate from existing coffers. According to the draft law, each newly established PMP department will include, in addition to police officers, several Sharia judges and Islamic scholars, gendered detention centers for both males and females, offices, and patrol cars. Given this need for resourcing, it is unlikely that the Ministry will be able to establish a presence for the PMP across all of its regions, especially smaller villages, rural areas, and IDP camps, without comprehensive reform of the entire SSG apparatus and significant funding.

While the potential effects of this draft law, if approved, may take time to become evident, CA-SYR will infer some possible impacts for residents and humanitarian and development organizations by drawing on an initial analysis of the articles and clauses in the draft law in a separate report. This report will provide deeper insight into the factors influencing the possible adoption and the extent to which this draft law will be implemented.

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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.

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