

SYRIA

**MONTHLY
REPORT**

MARCH 2024

CA – SYR

CRISIS ANALYSIS – SYRIA



March 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.

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Humanitarian updates



Tall Refaat, Northeast Syria

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) halted its water supply to the village of Tall Refaat. Reports attribute the decision to a succession of funding cuts meaning UNICEF can no longer afford to pay for water trucks to the area. Since 2021, UNICEF has reduced its daily provision of water to residents in the area from 2,400 cubic meters to 1,000 cubic meters.

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Politics and policy



A'zaz, Northwest Syria

Members of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) met with a delegation from the European Union, in the city of A'zaz. The meetings were attended by the president of the SIG, the Head of the Middle East and North Africa Division of the European External Action Service, and the Head of the EU Delegation to Syria, and discussed strategies for a political resolution in Syria, the implementation of United National Security Council Resolution 2254, preparations for the eighth Brussels Conference, and community resilience-building.

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Regional and international updates



Cairo, Egypt

The Syrian government's foreign minister, Faisal Mekdad, attended the 161st session of the Arab League Council in Cairo. Using the meeting as a platform to urge support for Syria, Mekdad called for assistance from Arab states in responding to Israeli airstrikes, dealing with terrorist groups, and providing relief from US and EU sanctions.

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Public health



Hajin, Northeast Syria

Hajin Hospital in rural Deir-Ez-Zor has been unable to take new patients due to a rise in cases of respiratory disease, particularly among children. Staff reported overcrowding in the children's unit of the hospital, which also treats patients from nearby towns including Busayrah and Baghuz. Some commentators attribute the rise in respiratory disease to climate change.

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Criminality



Amman, Jordan

Jordan Customs and the Jordanian Public Security Directorate (PSD) intercepted an attempt to smuggle 237,000 narcotic pills over the border into Syria. This latest seizure coincides with the implementation of a new Jordanian national strategy for drug prevention, spearheaded by the PSD in collaboration with 33 other state entities. The efforts signal a more concerted approach by Syria's southern neighbor to tackling the issue of drug smuggling.

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Services



Idleb, Northwest Syria

The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) has formed a committee tasked with preparing an employment system and election procedure for local councils in its areas, through workshops with former local council members, experts, and other stakeholders.

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Economy and markets



Damascus, South and central Syria

There has been a significant drop in the value of Syria's real estate market since 2011. Analysts point to a fall of around 55-60% in the actual value of real estate in this period, taking into account fluctuations in the exchange rate.

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Regional and international updates



Manama, Bahrain

The King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, has formally invited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to attend the 33rd regular session of the Arab League Summit, to be held in Manama on 16 May.

International

Constitutional Committee faces obstacles

South and central Syria

Syria unaffected by a reduction in global food prices

As-Sweida protestor killed in altercation with security forces

Northeast Syria

AANES ushers in new leadership

Torrential rains hit northeast Syria

Northwest Syria

Expanding protests against HTS

Cover image: Protests in Idleb against Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. (Source: [Syria TV](#))

Executive Summary

Protests against Abu Mohammad al-Jolani erupted across Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)-held, areas after allegations emerged of torture inside Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) prisons. Outraged residents took to the streets, calling for the removal of HTS leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and the dissolution of the SSG's General Security Service. HTS largely refrained from using force to avoid escalating the protests, and instead responded with a series of measures aimed at appeasing the protestors. While HTS has enacted many of its proposed reforms, and is in the process of developing further measures to improve its image, it is also betting on time to slow the momentum of the protests.

The UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, is making arrangements for the ninth session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, due to convene in Geneva this April, after he was forced to cancel last year's meeting. An ongoing disagreement regarding the meeting's location, however, has led certain parties to back out of the session. Russia has made it clear that it no longer views Geneva as a neutral location since Switzerland took a hostile stance towards its invasion of Ukraine. The Syrian government has echoed Russia's stance, and declined Pedersen's invitation to attend. Several alternative location suggestions put forward by Pedersen, Russia, and the Syrian government have all either been refused or stalled following the host government's withdrawal of their candidacy. Riyadh seems to provide a compromise location, though it remains unclear whether all sides will approve, and whether the Saudi government will consent to host. Meanwhile, the prospects of the meeting being canceled once are growing as the disagreement drags on.

Food prices in south and central Syria increased significantly during the month of Ramadan, making it difficult for households to purchase basic necessities. While an increase in prices is to be expected at the start of the holy month, economic experts have noted higher than average hikes in Syria compared to neighboring countries. This price hike also runs contrary to a reduction in global food prices seen over the past year. The government's decision to increase the price of services, the introduction of a new sales tax bracket, and monopolization have all been identified as key drivers of price increases. In As-Sweida, an altercation between protestors and security forces near the April 7 Reconciliation Center resulted in the death of one protestor. This has heightened tensions in the governorate and increased the risk of an armed confrontation with the Syrian government. Community and religious leaders successfully intervened to prevent escalation.

In northeast Syria, the People's Democratic Council elected Avin Sweid as new co-chair of the Executive Council of the Democratic Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES). Although Sweid is perceived to be reformist, her tenure is expected to be fraught with difficulties, notably the upcoming municipal elections, an increasingly tense intra-Kurdish relationship within Syria and regionally, and Turkey's threats of a military intervention in northeast Syria. In other developments, heightened rainfall in northeast Syria has given rise to lush green pastures benefiting cattle herders, while also improving water levels across dams in several areas. Despite these benefits, the rainfall has also caused flooding and the closure of the Semalka—Fiskhabour border crossing, while the release of toxic materials into the Euphrates following the collapse of a goldmine in Turkey has raised separate concerns about water quality.

Economic Indicators

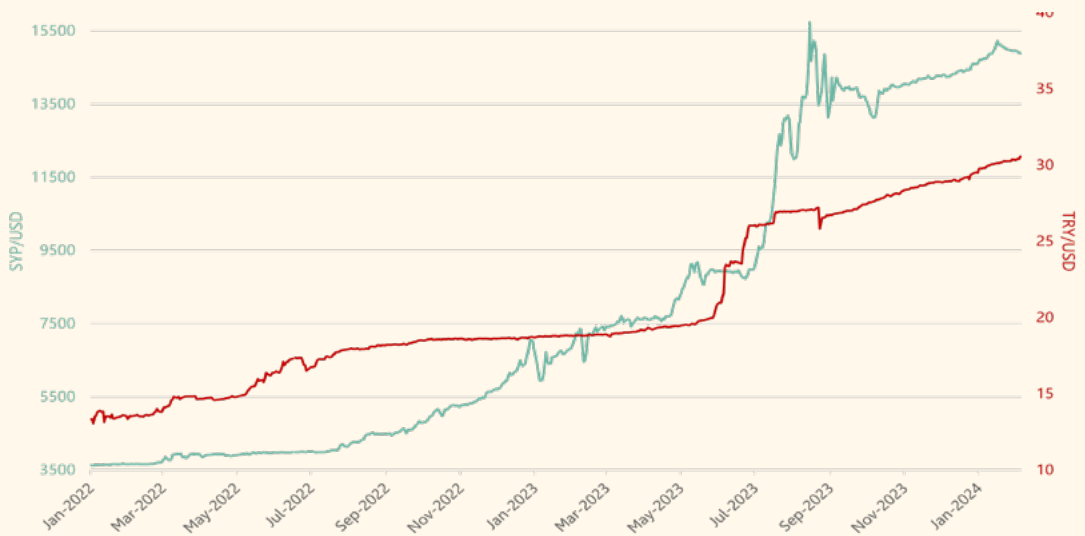
Economic indicator 1.

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

	December 2023	January 2024	February 2024
SYP/USD official exchange rate	12,600	13,200	13,200
SYP/USD parallel market rate	14,386.3 (1.6%)	14,921.0 (3.7%)	14,827.8 (-0.6%)
TRY/USD official rate	29.1 (1.4%)	30.1 (3.4%)	31.3 (4.0%)

Economic indicator 2.

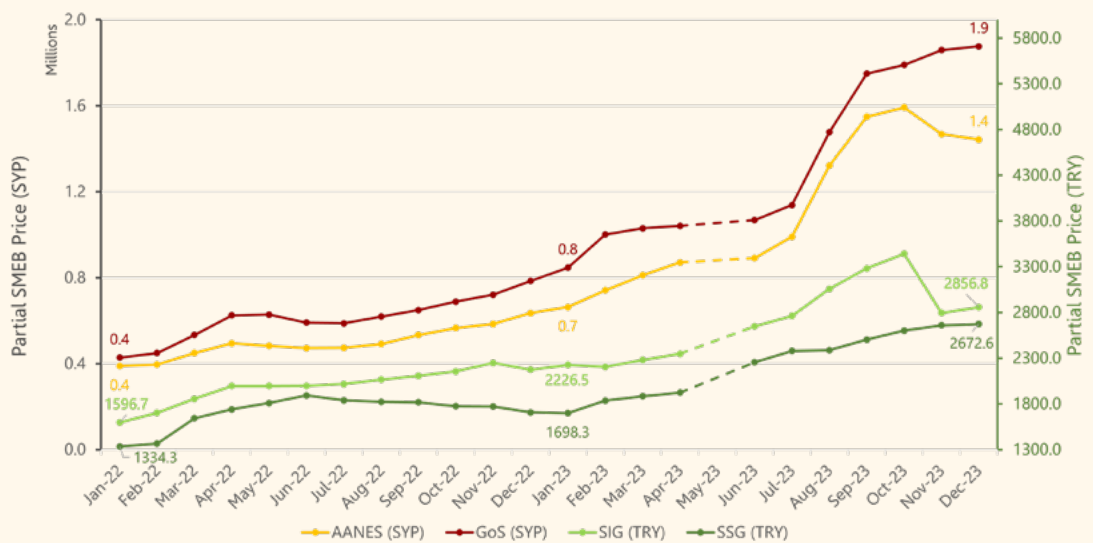
SYP/USD and TRY/USD exchange rates



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

Constitutional committee faces obstacles

Recent attempts to resume meetings of the Syrian Constitutional Committee have hit a familiar barrier, once again threatening to further delay the political process. On 17 March, the [UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, landed in Damascus](#) to meet with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Mekdad. Media outlets have speculated that the motive for his visit was to urge the Syrian government to attend the ninth session of the Constitutional Committee, scheduled for late April in Geneva. [Unlike Syrian opposition parties](#), the government had declined Pederson's [initial invitation on 27 February](#) due to a disagreement over the meeting's next location.

Over the past two years, the Syrian Constitutional Committee has repeatedly struggled to convene talks in Geneva. The difficulties were initially prompted by [Russia's perception of an infringement of Geneva's neutral status](#) following the onset of the war in Ukraine, although Russian and Syrian ministers have since put forward [several other locations](#) for the meetings. Their latest suggestion, Baghdad, was met with a further objection on the part of the US, which may itself be seeking to limit Iranian influence in the process as a whole.

Towards the end of the reporting period, [media outlets circulated rumors](#) that the Saudi capital, Riyadh, had been floated as a new alternative. It remains to be seen whether Riyadh will risk its political capital and host a meeting that, given the outcomes of the committee's eight former sessions, is likely to yield limited results. Irrespective of the Saudi decision, these developments since the start of March are indicative of how remote a prospect of credible UN-sponsored progress toward resolving the Syrian conflict remains.



Image 1: UN special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen meets with Syrian foreign minister Faisal al-Mekdad in Damascus on 10 September 10 2024. (Source: [AP Photo/Omar Sanadiki](#))

Russian veto of Geneva dissuades Syrian government

The Syrian government was initially dissuaded from attending the committee when its primary ally and sponsor, Russia, took issue with its location. Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Vershinin told media outlets that his country [refuses for the meeting to be held in Geneva](#), since “Switzerland has largely lost its neutral status, which is essential for the realization of international initiatives.” This purported loss of neutrality occurred when Switzerland took a hostile stance on Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Switzerland recently [joined the 13th package of EU sanctions against Russia](#) and is in the process of [transferring Russian assets](#) frozen as part of the sanctions over to Ukraine.

The search for an alternative location continues

The search for an alternative venue commenced last year, seeing [Muscat](#), [Cairo](#), [Nairobi](#), and [Baghdad](#) all put forward as possibilities. In a briefing to the Security Council in December 2023, Pedersen stated that “there is no venue in the region that is both on offer and attracts consensus”, and that he did not expect the situation to change soon. Sure enough, Pedersen is still unable to find an alternative location. The above alternatives were all refused, either by Russia or the US, for political reasons, due to the presence of a rival political influence, or because some governments, such as Oman, abstained from the vote.¹

Pedersen then worked to circumvent the issue by [attempting to convince the Syrian government](#) to attend irrespective of Russia’s refusal.² These efforts were not only unsuccessful, but led pro-government media outlets to [suggest](#) that Pedersen’s insistence on Geneva, despite reaffirmed refusals, were aimed at embarrassing Russia by portraying it as the principal obstacle to the talks. Given Russia’s increasing influence and leverage over the Syrian government since its intervention in 2015, any attempt by Pedersen to push Geneva is likely to fail. The government has become politically, diplomatically, and militarily reliant on Russia, whose interests now play a pivotal role in Syrian diplomacy.³

A lack of political will, weakened position, or delaying tactics?

While Russia may have legitimate concerns about attending meetings in Geneva, there could also be other motives behind its refusal. The war in Gaza and its potential regionalization may be a factor dissuading various actors from negotiating a lasting resolution in a country within the theater of operations: Israel and Iran-backed militias regularly exchange fire over Syrian territory. Alternatively, Russia could be refusing to negotiate because its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine and diminished presence in Syria have [weakened its position in the country](#). Finally, Russia’s refusal of several alternative suggestions could be a [delaying tactic](#) to feed the mutually beneficial deadlock resulting from the Syrian government’s [unwillingness to make concessions](#). What is certain is that a continued refusal of further location proposals tabled by Pedersen will result in a postponement or cancellation of the next committee session, as occurred in [July 2022](#).

1 Muscat was [announced as a potential location](#) in [August 2023](#), however the city later [withdrew its candidacy](#) without providing a reason. Media outlets reported that Egypt was pushing [Cairo](#) as an alternative, but no progress was made. Pedersen suggested [Nairobi](#), but the Russians [refused](#) and proposed that the meetings instead be held in an Arab capital city. The Syrian government then [unofficially suggested Baghdad](#), but the [United States reportedly refused](#) this option, possibly because of the Iranian influence in the city.

2 Pedersen considers the location to be a [secondary issue](#) and has repeatedly [emphasized the importance](#) of convening the meeting regardless of its venue.

3 The Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, [complained in early February](#) about the Syrian diplomatic delegation’s inability to meet without the presence of representatives of other countries, namely Russia and Iran. This is indicative of the hold Russia has on Syrian foreign policy.

Riyadh the latest alternative

All of this uncertainty could be clarified if Pedersen's latest suggestion of the Saudi capital, Riyadh, meets with consensus. Riyadh is a location likely to appeal to Western nations, and one that has already been accepted by the Syrian Negotiation Commission. This potential compromise came after pro-government media outlets quoted an unnamed Syrian diplomat expressing potential approval of the suggestion, and possibly hinting at a tacit acceptance from the Syrian government. It is possible that the government, for its part, is open to attending the next Constitutional Committee meeting because in doing so, it will give the impression that it is proceeding with the step-for-step process. Regardless, with Russia yet to agree and the Saudi government yet to officially consent to hosting the meeting, this latest compromise location could well still fail.

South and central Syria

Syria unaffected by a reduction in global food prices

Households across south and central Syria have been unable to afford many food items this Ramadan due to steep price hikes. While increases are to be expected at the beginning of the holy month, food prices this year are notably higher than in neighboring countries. Prices have not fallen across the whole year either, despite a reduction in global food prices, and this is due to several factors.

The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) [Food Price Index](#) has recorded a successive reduction in global food prices over the past 14 months.⁴ Markets in Syria were seemingly unaffected by this development, and [prices there have continued to increase](#) over the past several months. An economics professor at Damascus University, Shafic Arbash, even noted that [food prices in Syria are higher than those in neighboring countries](#) due to several inflationary factors: an increase in the price of services, a new sales tax bracket, monopolization, and import complications. The Syrian government's decision last month to [increase the price of services](#), particularly electricity and fuel, has increased the cost of production and transportation.

In January, the Syrian government introduced a new sales tax bracket that has financially burdened businesses and forced them to increase prices. Sources stated that the bracket ranges between 10 and 40 percent depending on the value of items (see Table 1). This means that a trader who wants to sell products worth 70 million SYP (5,000 USD) must pay a 40% sales tax worth 28 million SYP (2,000 USD). This will be an additional burden on struggling Syrian businesses, especially small-to-medium ones, who are already [charged tens of thousands of dollars in taxes](#).

Value of items sold (in SYP)	Sales tax
1,000,000	10%
2,000,000	20%
3,000,000	30%
4,000,000+	40%

Syria's economy has also become less competitive over the years, meaning that traders have no additional incentive to lower their prices. Media outlets quoted a source in the Consumer Protection Association, who stated that [60% of imports](#), particularly food items, are monopolized. Government policies, complicated bureaucratic processes,

⁴ The index calculates the average of meat, dairy, cereals, vegetable oils, and sugar prices, and weighs them against their average export shares for the period 2014-2016.

and lack of import funding are [discouraging traders from importing and crippling their ability to do so](#), leading to a reduction in supply and a consequent increase in prices. Syria's special economic circumstances and all the abovementioned factors place its market prices at [25-50% higher](#) than in neighboring countries.

Syrians unable to celebrate Ramadan

The price hikes have left Syrian households unable to secure their basic necessities, let alone celebrate Ramadan this year. Cooking traditional Ramadan dishes has become financially burdensome for many, with the cost of one meal for a family of five increasing from [150,000 SYP \(11\\$\) in mid-February](#) to [a minimum of 300,000 SYP \(21\\$\)](#), bringing the total for the entirety of the holy month to around 9 million SYP (\$643). On 25 March, local officials told the media that there is [minimal market activity in Damascus city](#) this year since households have been forced to dispense with several items bought in previous years. [Demand for dairy products is reported to have decreased by 65%](#) this Ramadan compared to last year, due to high prices.

Measures to mitigate unaffordability

The Syrian government has taken several measures to provide food items at more affordable prices during Ramadan. The Syria Trade Establishment (STE) introduced food baskets at competitive prices across government-held areas to help households throughout the month. The head of the STE, Ziad Hazaa said that the [food baskets are being sold in Damascus, Lattakia, and Hama](#), at prices ranging from 116,000 SYP (\$8) to 180,000 SYP (13\$), depending on the contents and quantity of food included. The STE also sold meat at [20-25% lower than market prices](#) in ten of its shops in Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Lattakia. Meanwhile, the government set up [designated special markets](#) called Aswak al-Kheir that provide free electricity to sellers offering food at reasonable prices to residents. To reinforce these efforts, Members of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce have cooperated with the STE to sell food items to residents without a profit. Finally, in cooperation with local authorities, the Chamber also distributed 3,000 food baskets to families in need.

Prices likely to continue to rise

Prices in government-held areas are likely to continue to rise if the government remains insistent on imposing restrictions on economic activity and commerce in general. The Syrian government has so far failed to introduce timely economic policies encouraging economic activity and lacks the resources to greatly improve the situation. Monopolization remains a pressing issue within the Syrian economy, impeding competition and inadvertently raising food prices. The government's measures to mitigate price increases during Ramadan are unlikely to have a significant impact on these issues, particularly for those living off the [minimum wage](#) of 278,000 SYP (\$20) in government-held areas. For comparison, the food baskets introduced by the STE are worth 65% of the minimum wage, or 45% of the [average public sector salary](#) of 400,000 SYP (\$29). This means that government employees are already spending more than half of their salary on food baskets, without taking rent and other expenses including healthcare, cleaning supplies, and schooling into consideration.

As-Sweida protestor killed in altercation with security forces

Tensions rose in As-Sweida in early March after a protestor was killed by government forces outside of the April 7 Reconciliation Center in As-Sweida city. On 28 February, an altercation broke out between protestors approaching the center and the guards on duty at the time. The pro-government combatants guarding the center fired rounds into the air to scare away the protestors who continued approaching regardless. 52-year-old Jawad al-Barouki, an activist and father of two from As-Sweida city, was hit in the chest by a bullet and died on the scene. Al-Barouki's death is the first fatality that has occurred in the protests since they began back in August 2023. The incident has served to heighten the risk of armed confrontation with the Syrian government.



Image 2: Jawad al-Barouki's funeral on 29 February. (Source: [Suwayda 24](#))

Protestors react to Al-Barouki's death

Protestors initially reacted in anger to the news of Al-Barouki's death. One group of protestors tore down a portrait of President Bashar al-Assad hanging near the As-Sweida National Hospital, before moving to Tishrine Square where they ransacked the local Baath party office. Another group gathered at the residence of Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajari, the de facto leader of the protests. One day later, on the evening of 29 February, local sources reported that unknown assailants aimed rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) at security branches across As-Sweida city. In a separate incident on 1 March, RPGs were launched at the April 7 Reconciliation Center, resulting in material damage.

Despite these immediate reactions, community and religious leaders opted to de-escalate the situation, rather than inflaming tensions, successfully guiding protestors away from further confrontations. Al-Hajari called on protestors to remain peaceful and join the funeral procession for Al-Barouki. Sources in the area also reported that community and religious leader Sheikh Youssef al-Jarbou succeeded in convincing the Al-Barouki family not to pursue action against the Syrian government. While Al-Barouki was not a prominent individual or community leader, solidarity with his family, who come from As-Sweida, could create disruption in the area. Hundreds of protestors attended the funeral in the city's Al-Samara Square on 29 February and later held a demonstration in Al-Karama square to commemorate the deceased protestor. On 4 March, protestors gathered in front of the reconciliation center and marched towards the courthouse, where a delegation of lawyers filed a lawsuit at the Public Prosecutor's office to bring Al-Barouki's killer to justice.

Neither side wants to escalate

Protests have now been taking place in As-Sweida governorate for the past 200 days, and ostensibly neither side wishes to escalate. The killing of Al-Barouki is one of several incidents, however, that have threatened to push boundaries of these demonstrations, and spur both protestors and government-aligned stakeholders to increased violence. Informed sources suggest that the protestors recognize the importance of remaining peaceful, and view the possibility of an armed conflict as solely in the government's favor. Al-Hajari has himself called for peaceful protest during periods of heightened tension, although emphasizing that the movement will be prepared for armed conflict if this is forced upon them.

For several reasons, the Syrian government does not wish the situation to escalate either. The steep economic decline in government-held areas has left the government with meager resources and severely depleted foreign currency reserves. While the government is technically capable of military action, it would come at great financial cost. It has already made efforts to reduce military spending by demobilizing troops two years in a row and issuing a directive to ration the use of ammunition on the front with the opposition-held north.

Despite international attention gradually shifting away from the As-Sweida protests, particularly since the start of the war in Gaza, foreign governments are still working to monitor developments in the governorate. Following the death of Al-Barouki, the US Embassy in Syria issued a statement professing it to be “greatly concerned with the regime's use of excessive force against peaceful protestors in [As-Sweida].” Russia also has a vested interest in maintaining calm in the south, which could be a potential catalyst zone or theater of operations in the event of a regional spillover of the war in Gaza. Russian forces have again increased their presence in southern Syria since February 2024, establishing an additional checkpoint at the disengagement line near the occupied Golan heights in addition to observation posts in Quneitra. In line with these goals, there were reports that a Russian military delegation visited As-Sweida a few days after Al-Barouki's death, where they met with the various security branches in the governorate and asked them to de-escalate.

Northeast Syria

AANES ushers in new leadership

On 14 March, the People's Democratic Council in northeast Syria formally accepted the [resignation of Berivan Khaled](#) from her position as co-chair of the Executive Council of the Democratic Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES). Shortly thereafter, the council announced the [election of Avin Sweid](#) as a new co-chair alongside Hussein Othman, who assumed the co-chairmanship in [May 2023](#), following the resignation of Abed Hamid Mehbash. Given Sweid's perceived reformist background, her election could be a continuation of [attempts by various political stakeholders](#) within AANES to signal their openness to reform and policy change to both external and internal audiences. Despite these indications, the road to achieving such reform remains long and fraught with various complexities.

Who is Avin Sweid?



Image 3: Avid Sweid. (Source: [Ronahi](#))

Born in Quamishli in 1981, Avin Sweid holds a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Aleppo and is now a seasoned politician and prominent figure. Her first senior role was as the director of the television channel Ronahi between 2014 and 2016. She then went on to work for [Kongra Star](#) (Star Congress), a women's organization operating primarily in Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) that, in its own words, focuses on “organizing, educating, and empowering women for liberation and gender equality”. Sweid was here until 2021.

In addition to her numerous roles, Sweid comes from a family with longstanding ties to the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Within the PYD and beyond, locally informed sources noted that character, highlighting that the new co-chair's electoral victory – a position equivalent to a prime minister in other political systems – was therefore welcomed by many political circles. While her policy priorities remain unannounced, local stakeholders expect her tenure to be welcomed and potentially diffuse tensions that local communities hold towards AANES akin to the promises of governance and personnel changes in Deir-ez-Zor in late 2023.

Prospects and issues for AANES's new leadership

Notwithstanding the optimism, statements regarding Sweid's potential to usher in policy reform are as yet speculative. Various individuals within the PYD, several of whom have been in their positions for many years, wield considerable influence on policy within AANES-held areas. Sweid's election will therefore do little to combat criticisms leveled at AANES, for example regarding the perceived influence of prominent advisors appointed by the administration (known as Kadros in Kurdish) in regional and local governance. Other challenges directly impacting local communities, such as conscription, will continue to pose a significant hurdle in AANES-held areas.

The first item on the agenda for AANES and its new co-chair will be the upcoming municipal elections scheduled for 30 April in all areas under the administration's control. The elections were [formally announced](#) after the first meeting of the Higher Electoral Commission, which was formed on 28 February. This meeting has also led to the creation of three offices under the auspices of the commission: the oversight office, the appeals office, and the electoral district office, though the role of the latter remains undefined.

Several challenges have already come into focus in relation to the election, which could have an impact on participation. Most prominently, there is no electoral law to govern them. Though a draft electoral law was [another item discussed by the commission](#) during its meeting on 28 March, the final version is yet to be published, which could create confusion as to who is eligible to run for office, thereby limiting the pool of candidates. Similarly, [persistent tensions](#) between the PYD and rival Syrian political parties under the Kurdish National Council (KNC) umbrella could dissuade the latter from participating. This would tarnish the legitimacy of the elections in the eyes of KNC supporters, and potentially further strain Syrian Kurdish-Kurdish relations.

Sweid's own political background may offer some insight into possible future directions for AANES's relationships with regional actors. From 2022 to early 2024, Sweid served as AANES's representative in the KRI. This important role, which is widely valued among local stakeholders, is particularly relevant due to the historic tensions between the ruling parties in the KRI and AANES-held areas, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PYD respectively. During this period, Sweid frequently criticized [Turkey](#) for its aerial bombardment of Iraq and Syria, and the [KDP](#) for its attitude towards AANES and its KRI representatives in Suleimaniyeh, a governorate controlled by the KDP's main Iraqi Kurdish competitor, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Recent regional dynamics revolving around the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), coupled with Sweid's existing stances on Turkish and KDP policies, could potentially strain regional Kurdish-Kurdish relationships. [Turkey's threat to pursue military intervention](#) in northeast Syria and Iraq in the summer of 2024, in a bid to protect its borders from operations by the PKK, is likely



Image 4: Turkey and Iraq's foreign ministers during a meeting in Baghdad, March 2024. (Source: [AFP](#))

to intensify pressure on Sweid and the AANES. Iraq's concession to that threat by [outlawing the PKK](#) could also be read as an effort to placate Turkey, silo the PKK, and isolate the AANES by extension, given the alleged ties between the latter two actors. Repairing these frayed relationships promises a formidable challenge for Sweid.

The context facing Sweid at the helm of the AANES is thus immensely thorny. What is more, the minimal cooperation in evidence between the AANES and its neighbors to address critical climate-related issues (outlined in the subsequent section), combined with potential obstacles in implementing reforms, suggests that many of these issues may remain unresolved. This places the administration's new leadership in a difficult position at the very start of its tenure.

Torrential rains hit northeast Syria

During the reporting period, northeast Syria has witnessed significantly increased rainfall, reflecting a [continuing trend](#) identified by CA-SYR in the last quarter of 2023. [Data released by the Syrian government's Ministry of Agriculture](#) provided evidence to support this observation, indicating that, on average, rainfall in Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor is currently approaching levels recorded in 2020, a benchmark year providing the cut-off before the most recent drought. The most notable increase was observed in Ar-Raqqa, where cumulative rainfall up to March 2024 exceeded the total rainfall in Ar-Raqqa in 2020 by 117%. Conversely, the widest disparity was noted in Deir-ez-Zor, where the cumulative rainfall up to March 2024 amounted to only 57% of the governorate's average for the year 2020. In the data for Al-Hasakeh, meanwhile, rainfall up to March 2024 constitutes 80% of the seasonal average for 2020 in the governorate.

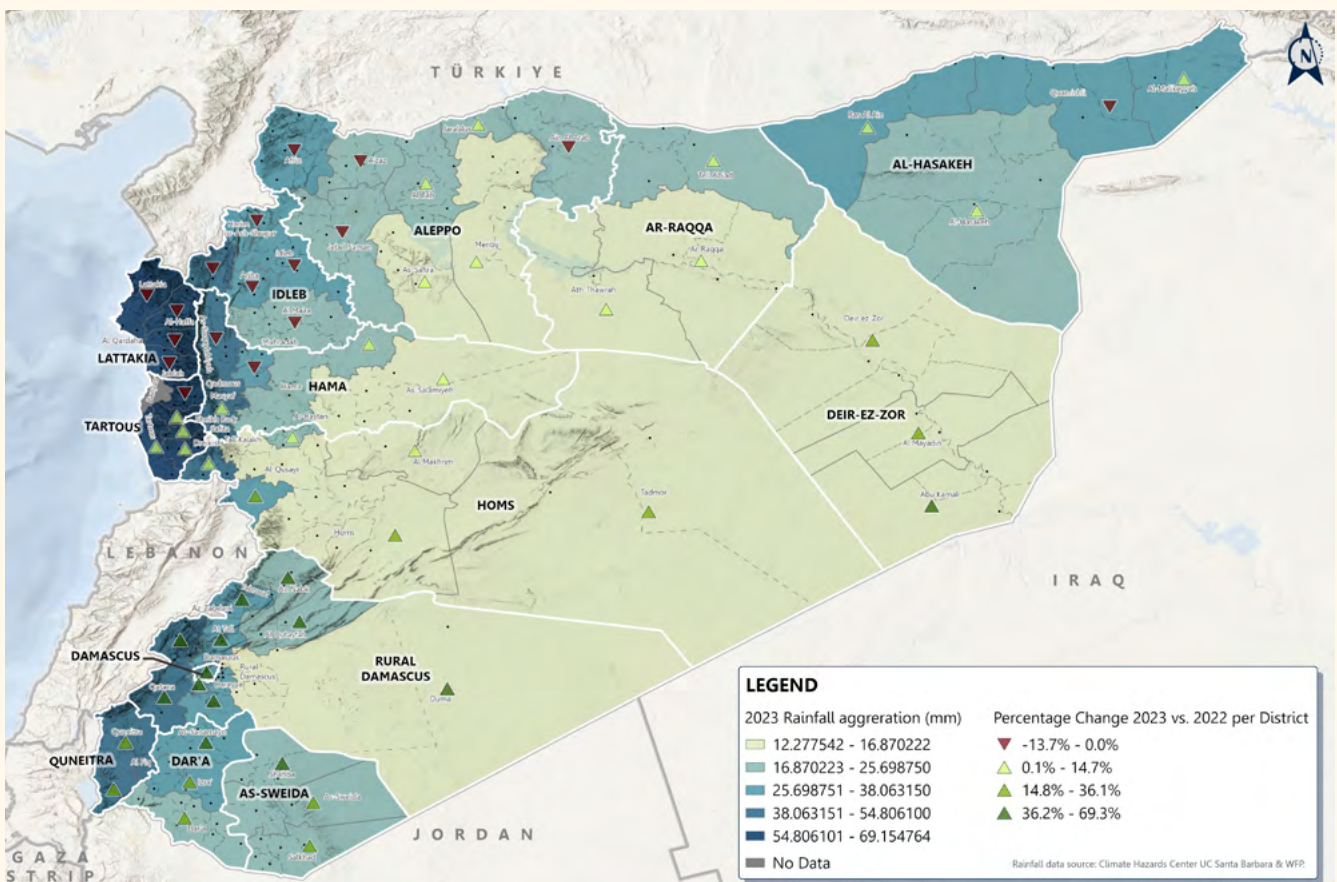


Image 5: Change in rainfall aggregation between 2022 and 2023. (Source: [CA-SYR 2023 Syria in Review - Humanitarian Report](#))

Farmers and markets reap the benefits

The increased rainfall has boosted gains for farmers, traders, and markets alike. On 24 March, the AANES issued a [decision](#) authorizing farmers to trade barley in regions outside of AANES jurisdiction. As stated in the directive, this decision was made in response to heightened rainfall, which stimulated growth in numerous pastures, creating surpluses and reducing reliance on barley as fodder for livestock.

As pasturelands have expanded and provided intense stimulus for cattle breeders, [economic activity has soared within the cattle market](#). This, combined with the advent of Ramadan, has allowed cattle traders to meet heightened demand in the KRI, with media sources noting a [surge in exports](#). While this led to price increases within markets in AANES-held areas, the overall effect of the heightened rainfall has been beneficial for traders, creating new opportunities for profit and expanding market reach.

The benefits of the rainfall extend beyond immediate market impacts and into the medium term. According to [a statement by AANES authorities](#), the rainfall has improved water levels across dams in various areas, including Al-Hasakeh, Quamishli, Qahtaniyyeh, Amuda, Jawadiyah, Maabada, and Darbasiyah. Although the statement does not provide specifics regarding the extent of the water level increase, the rise in water supply is anticipated to be a welcome relief. This increase could lead to greater hydro-generated grid-provided electricity, and alleviate residents' reliance on private diesel-powered generators. Developments like these are likewise expected to positively impact [farmers](#), who [note](#) that increased rainfall could decrease their dependence on generators for pumping groundwater.



Image 6: Flooding of the Balikh River damages agricultural land in Ar-Raqqa. (Source: [North Press Agency](#))

Flooding and border closures

Despite these potential rewards, the torrential rains since January 2024 have also inflicted damage in some areas, underscoring the vital importance of robust infrastructure design. On 14 February, media outlets reported that [IDP camps to the south and north of Ar-Raqqa city were damaged by rainfall](#), with the lack of drainage systems leading to a risk of diseases spreading. Similarly, on 24 March, media reports quoted [statements by AANES officials](#) indicating that more than ten houses in Al-Malikeyyeh had suffered damages due to clogged drainage systems. Such incidents are [not unprecedented](#), and frequently affect internal displacement camps and agricultural lands, often due to river overflows, as witnessed in [Ar-Raqqa](#) between February and March 2023.

The torrential rains also underscore the necessity for early warning systems to mitigate potential hazards. On 20 March, the [bridge at the Semalka–Fiskhabour border crossing linking northeast Syria to the KRI collapsed](#) due to heavy rain in Iraq's Dohuk governorate, resulting in the closure of the border. Media reports indicate that travelers intending to enter the KRI are now being [rerouted to the Al-Walid border crossing](#), with no specified timeline for the reopening of the Semalka–Fiskhabour crossing.



Image 7: The destroyed bridge at the Fishkabour–Semalka border crossing. (Source: [Enab Baladi](#))

Water governance and regional issues: Impediments to medium-term benefits

In the medium term, several significant obstacles are likely to limit the impact of rainfall benefits. Turkey's aerial targeting of infrastructure sites in northeast Syria since [October 2023](#) has significantly impacted the provision of services, including water, with several [outages](#) reported. The increased rainfall will not, therefore, automatically translate into an improvement in water supply. Additionally, the effects of the February [landslide](#), which impacted a goldmine in Turkey have raised concerns about toxic materials spreading into the Euphrates River and reaching northeast Syria. The AANES already [raised alarm bells](#) after cyanide and sulfuric acid were found in water samples, and a reduction in water quality could counteract the benefits of increased supply. Despite the need, the likelihood of the AANES pursuing cooperation with Turkey and Iraq on environmental issues such as this remains slim (for reasons mentioned in the previous section), particularly in the context of northeast Syria's increasing isolation, whether perceived or actual.



Image 8: The landslide at the Coper gold mine near Ilıc village, eastern Turkey. (Source: [Bloomberg](#))

More broadly, the conflict in Syria has greatly disrupted governance structures and the ability to implement sustainable and effective water resource management policies. In AANES-held areas, similarly to in other regions, the urgent need to secure water resources has led to an increase in [unauthorized drilling](#) of water wells and [water theft](#), depleting the network's resources. As a result, it remains to be seen how much of the water from recent rainfall will contribute to achieving wider and more sustainable water access in AANES-controlled northeast Syria. Experts have found that much of northeast Syria's rainfall is wasted due to a lack of water storage infrastructure in the region. This renders it doubtful that farmers and communities will reap the full benefits of the increased rainfall.

Climate change and water resource management ultimately remain a seismic task and challenge in northeast Syria. While yielding positive outcomes, recent heavy rainfall underscores the critical importance of engagement and investment in climate and water-resource management by stabilization and humanitarian entities across northeast Syria. Without proactive measures, initial benefits could be wasted and instead generate significant risk.

Northwest Syria

Expanding protests against HTS

Discontent with the security practices of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) and economic deterioration sparked a spate of protests across HTS-held areas throughout March. The protests are widely held to be significant for a number of reasons, not least since their primary demand is the resignation of HTS leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. As it stands, HTS has responded lightly to the demonstrations, allowing them to proceed and issuing a formal apology for several security-related incidents. It has also instigated a series of consultations and policy amendments aimed at appeasing participants. In addition to reflecting the intensity of the protests, this conciliatory approach may indicate concerns about HTS's trajectory within the group itself. The number of arrests made as part of recent purges are at the forefront of the movement's criticisms.

The likely implications of the protests for HTS, as well as their general trajectory, are varying and dependent on geopolitical and local dynamics. In one sense, HTS's pragmatic response by adopting policies that so far meet the demands of protestors risks sowing division between pragmatists and ideologues within its ranks. It is nevertheless unlikely that the group will harshen that approach without the threat of military involvement by Russia, the Syrian government, or the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Protest triggers

Already unique in their scale and demands, the protests were compounded by several issues and grievances directed at HTS. Their source can broadly be attributed to the [revelation](#) that many of those released following their detention on espionage charges in an arrest campaign in June were subjected to torture while in HTS custody. Outrage at these allegations was then aggravated on 24 February, when HTS admitted to the [killing of a detainee under torture five months prior](#) and the burying of his body without informing family members.⁵ This triggered protests in Sarmada the following day. Since early March, the demonstrations have [continued to spiral](#), drawing increasing numbers and spreading to new areas in several areas of Idleb and the western parts of rural Aleppo.⁶ Protestors call for Al-Jolani's resignation, the dissolution of the General Security Service and the formation of a new Shura Council, among other demands.

Tensions within the HTS's armed forces, generated by extensive arrests of the group's leaders and members, and the torture of many while under investigation, have also been a key factor in the intensification of the protests. Some of the foremost participants in the demonstrations are Sharia officials who have defected from HTS, the families of detained military commanders subjected to torture and of unreleased detainees, as well a number of figures from academia and the media. Also dissatisfied with HTS, Hizb Al-Tahrir has played a crucial role in many of the protests as both a participant and instigator.

A closer look at protest themes and slogans reveals another cause driving the movement. In their slogans, protesters highlight deteriorating economic conditions as a primary source of discontent. They hold HTS responsible for deprivation in its areas, attributing this to the group's monopoly over many economic sectors and criticising the tax policies of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). They see these as

5 The killed detainee belongs to the Ahrar Army, which is affiliated with the National Liberation Front and operates within the [Al-Fath Al-Mubin operations room](#) led by HTS in Idleb.

6 The main locations are: Idleb, Sarmada, Bennsh, Taftanaz, Foah, Atma, Kelly, Deir Hassan, Sahara, Termanin, Armanaz, Toum, Ehsem, Kafr Takharim, Ariha, Jisr Ash-Shugur, Atareb, Daret Azza, Abzimo.

contributing to high unemployment, price hikes, and general poverty, amid a reduction of humanitarian aid from international organizations in the area.

Although participation in the protests remains limited proportionate to the population in HTS-held areas, there is clearly an ongoing involvement of local communities. For its part, HTS has shown flexibility in its management of the protests, avoiding escalating tensions by refraining from use of force. Nonetheless, some security incidents have been recorded, such as several attacks on protestors in the city of Daret Azza and harassment of women on their way to protests in Idlib, for which HTS was quick to apologize, arresting those responsible.



Image 9: Protests against Al-Jolani in Idlib. (Source: [AlJazeera](#))

Reactions to the protests

Many and various initiatives have been launched in an effort to resolve the crisis by groups of Sharia scholars, academics, and activists. These initiatives have centered on tackling demands for the toppling of Al-Jolani, the formation of independent judicial committees to review the cases of detainees, and political, economic, and administrative reform, particularly reform of the Shura Council to represent all segments of the society. The Syrian Islamic Council, associated with the Syrian Interim Government, has also issued a statement praising the popular movement. In this statement it called for the formation of a revolutionary leadership to uphold the principles of the revolution, protect residents' dignity and rights, and combat injustice and corruption.

In its own response to the protests, HTS introduced several measures at various levels of the group, the Shura Council, and the SSG. On 1 March, HTS announced an initiative to defuse the protests via the following measures:

1. Release of all detainees cleared of espionage charges.
2. Arrest of investigators who investigated this case.
3. Formation of a judicial committee to review the rights of released detainees, hold any investigators found to have committed offenses to account, and conduct an inquiry into the offenses and events that precipitated them.
4. A series of meetings and consultations with various actors and groups (both civil and military) to hear their opinions and recommendations, and keep them informed of the latest developments.

5. Several meetings, across two levels, to conduct a comprehensive review of security procedures: between members within the General Security Service, and between HTS leadership and the General Security Service.
6. A visit of HTS prisons to establish a picture of conditions within them and determine the state of detainees.
7. Review of proposals for the issuing of a general amnesty.

The initiative was received positively, with 11 of the [foreign fighter blocs](#) in Idlib issuing a joint statement in support of Al-Jolani and HTS.⁷ Although it endorsed protesters' demands, the bloc confirmed its confidence in HTS's leadership and approval of the proposed reforms. The HTS [Central Military Operations Command](#) also issued a similar statement affirming its support for the leadership and reforms.

On 4 March, having heard the claims of 155 people, the Judicial Committee formed in line with the above directives issued [its first statement](#). It confirmed progress made on measures 2 and 3 on the list above, as well as the formation of two additional committees: a medical committee tasked with assessing the health of released detainees, and a financial committee to look into the extent of the material losses they incurred. On 7 March, the committee also released [Abu Maria Al-Qahtani](#), the prime suspect in the espionage case, after he was cleared of all charges.



Image 10: Interior and Justice ministers meeting with civilians in the Central region. (Source: [Interior Ministry, Meta](#))

These measures were followed by [a consultation on 5 March](#) bringing together Al-Jolani, the Shura Council, the SSG, and civil society representatives to hear demands and recommendations for improving security, economic, and living conditions in HTS-held areas. The result of the session was a promise by Al-Jolani to reform the group's security apparatus and develop its judicial and supervisory process.

At Shura Council level, eight community committees were formed covering all HTS-held areas.⁸ Each committee brings together six representatives from the legislative and executive authorities and civil groups within each region, and will meet periodically to gather suggestions and demands, and resolve any problems raised by residents. According to [a statement by the head of Shura Council](#), these committees had already managed to solve 25% of the problems submitted to them. On 25 March, the Shura Council announced the formation of a Supreme Elections Committee tasked with drawing up a process for election to the council, and establishing legal committees and electoral sub-committees to supervise that process. These reforms are intended to expand the number of seats on the council and ensure fair representation of all sections of society. Once implemented, elections will be held to establish a new General Shura Council, responsible for setting laws, evaluating government performance, and ensuring popular oversight.

The new SSG, which was [approved by the Shura Council on 27 February](#), has also issued various decisions in its own effort to respond to protesters' demands. On 5

⁷ The Turkestan Islamic Party, the Uzbek Brigade, the Caucasus Brigade, the Moroccan Brigade, the Sunni Emigrants Movement in Iran, the Tajik group, the Albanian group, the Ghuraba battalion, the Baloch group, the Utbah ibn Farqad (Azeri) group, and the Abu Yaqoub al-Turki battalion.

⁸ A committee of 6 members was formed in each of the Sarmada region, Harim region, Jisr Ash-Shughor region, the Central region, the Northern region, the Atma region, the Ariha region, and the Idlib city region.

March, the SSG announced a [general amnesty for prisoners](#), with some conditions and exceptions. This saw the release of an initial round of [420 prisoners](#), and a gradual release of others from that date onwards. The SSG also [reduced or canceled fees for building permit applications](#), then [withdrew security approval requirements](#) for ownership transfers and other procedures. The head of the SSG, Engineer Muhammad al-Bashir, and a delegate from the Department of Political Affairs, Obaida Arnaout, [met with union representatives](#) to hear their proposals for developing union work. A committee was formed to devise a working system and [electoral procedure for local councils](#) within the SSG. Finally, and most significantly, the SSG established a [General Security Service](#), which will be placed within and governed by the Ministry of Interior.

Despite all these measures taken during the first half of the month, protests continued in HTS areas, with renewed calls for the removal of Al-Jolani. On 13 March, the HTS leader responded by calling a meeting with members of the Shura council and the military and security branches of HTS, along with ministers, economists, and Sharia scholars to discuss further developments in light of the ongoing protests. During the meeting, Al-Jolani warned of the risk of reversing gains made during the revolution and stressed that a return to factionalism would be a major disaster for 'liberated' areas. Accordingly, he announced his [willingness to resign](#) if a majority of 60-70% of that present could agree on a new candidate for leader. Instead, the attendees affirmed their full support for Al-Jolani.

This meeting was tantamount to ending further discussion of a change of leadership in official circles, shifting the focus entirely onto reforms within the Shura Council and the SSG. Several further reforms were indeed [agreed as a result of the meeting](#), consolidating measures already introduced with regards to popular consultation, Shura Council elections, and the restructuring General Security Service within the SSG; as well as introducing new directives to review economic policies, judicial procedures, and the role of unions and councils.

Impact of the protests and implications for HTS

By the end of March, it was clear that attempts by the HTS leadership to appease the released detainees had largely failed. This is clearly evidenced by the number of detainees who have participated in the demonstrations, sharing stories of the offenses they themselves experienced with protestors and thereby inciting further action. In view of this, the first, and already witnessed, impact of the protests has been to reveal opposition to HTS and underscore the group's inability to control narratives. HTS's lackluster approach to controlling narratives has therefore served to exacerbate existing resentment towards the group within local communities, harden protestors' position and potentially shift the demonstrations towards something approaching a zero-sum game against HTS. Should it indeed feel cornered in this way, the group may be swayed to take a more aggressive stance on these protests.

On a positive note, however, the protests have also empowered civilians in HTS areas to challenge the group's grip on security and push through their demands. The protests



Image 11: The SSG's decision to cancel building fees. (Source: [Meta](#))

have already upset the status quo in HTS-held areas, and could seem likely to usher in a series of reforms. Specifically, if participation in the Shura Council is indeed expanded to incorporate new faces from both HTS and civilian groups, this could weaken HTS's control over the council and empower other actors to contribute to decisions and policies regulating life in HTS areas. Likewise, HTS's control of security could be impacted if the restructuring of the General Security Service to fall within the Ministry of Interior also goes ahead. This could result in the new Shura Council pushing to appoint more widely acceptable figures, who were not involved in previously criticized HTS's policies, to its leadership, thereby sidelining HTS. Despite these impacts, there has not thus far been a substantial change at a security level within HTS. It also remains to be seen with what stringency HTS will implement the promised reforms affecting the SSG and the Shura Council.

Potential ramifications do not only depend on local stakeholders, but also extend to regional actors and their reactions. Turkey's position on the protests has thus far been unclear, and could therefore have implications for HTS in the near future. Turkey's interest in the region is broadly to maintain a state of stability conducive to preventing new waves of conflict-induced refugees towards its borders. Simultaneously, however, Turkey might have an interest in weakening HTS, which has shown signs of diverging from Turkish interests by seeking to expand its influence over areas north of Aleppo. A preoccupation on the part of HTS with strife and shake-ups in its own areas could therefore dampen its ambitions in those held by the SNA. This would give Turkey greater control over HTS for other geopolitical reasons, such as a possible deal with the Syrian government or Russia regarding the future of the Syrian conflict.

Likely scenarios for HTS

The possible implications and impacts outlined above evidently hinge on the trajectory of the ongoing protests. There are therefore a number of possible scenarios for the future of the protests and methods HTS may use to handle them.

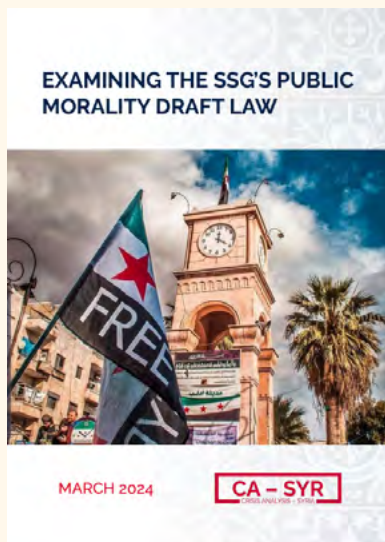
The first, and currently most likely, scenario is that HTS will continue to tolerate the protests, refraining from using force to shut them down, in an attempt to improve its image in society, and instead betting on time to reduce their momentum. In parallel, the group will seek to respond to protestors' demands, with the exception of any removal of Al-Jolani, by implementing the reforms announced. This will essentially involve clearing former detainees of espionage charges and relaxing security in HTS areas. Economic reforms will serve to consolidate this, as already evidenced by the decision to reduce or cancel some of the fees recently introduced by the SSG.

To avoid an escalation of the protests, HTS may attempt to appease activists and use mediation through clerics and tribal leaders. It will also seek to heal the rift in the military wing with the help of neutral leaders, in an attempt to realign differing factions. HTS may also use the Shura Council elections as a means of bringing accepted figures into the group and giving HTS a new front to present to society. If the elections are genuine, and if the new electees show themselves willing to introduce new policies within HTS governance, then the protests may dwindle in the streets and instead be folded into council discussions. In this form, protests' demands will be easier for HTS to handle.

The second, less likely scenario, is that HTS will seek to use force to definitively shut down the protests. This alternatively looks unlikely at present, particularly in light of the uncertainty within the leadership of HTS regarding its ability to harmonize dissatisfied factions within its armed forces. Nonetheless, certain statements by HTS leaders could indicate a limit to HTS's willingness to concede. On 9 March, [a spokesman for the HTS Political Affairs Department made the point](#) that certain demands "require an ideal situation, but we are in a reality governed by war, and there are enemies who will not miss any opportunity to exploit internal weakness." Though conclusions remain speculative, there are signs here of a potential attempt to justify forceful measures,

with the delegate's allusion to "enemies" heralding a potential demonization of the protestors.

Resorting to force could, however, sow further division within the HTS armed forces, and give rise to military groups in open support of the protests. Such a scenario would be inflammatory in several ways. It could significantly weaken HTS, in turn pushing external actors like Turkey to intervene to restore stability, either directly or by way of the SNA. Likewise, the Syrian government and Russia could seek to profit from the turmoil to extend their own zones of control. Ultimately, if HTS can reach an agreement with dissatisfied members of its armed forces, it will release itself of the pressure that has so far forced it to concede to protestors. In that case, HTS could conceivably resort to neutralizing the main activists in the protests (whether through intimidation, arrest, or assassination) and placing the blame on actors destabilizing the region, such as the Syrian government or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In this context, HTS may also escalate military action on its fronts with Syrian government forces. It already made movements in this direction in March by seeking to distract attention from the protests by increasing infiltration operations. The outcome of this scenario would be intensified bombing of the region by Syrian government forces, frightening civilians and justifying measures to prevent gatherings in the interest of public safety.



Examining the SSG's Public Morality Draft Law, March 2024

On 2 January, media outlets published an unverified draft copy of a public morality law issued by the Ministry of Interior of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib. The draft law sets out a series of prohibited religious and moral practices, and contains provisions for the establishment of a Public Morality Police (PMP), recruitment for which is currently underway. This new legislation could constitute a means for Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) to appease dissatisfied hardliners in areas under its control. Its terms do not, however, signal a radical departure from the status quo in these areas. The stringency with which the SSG intends or is able to implement the law also remains unclear. Irrespective of this, the draft law is expected to have an impact on daily life in SSG-held areas. CA-SYR attempts to analyze the challenges posed by the draft law, offering a non-exhaustive matrix of potential issues for NGOs, divided into three categories: direct, indirect, and tertiary challenges.

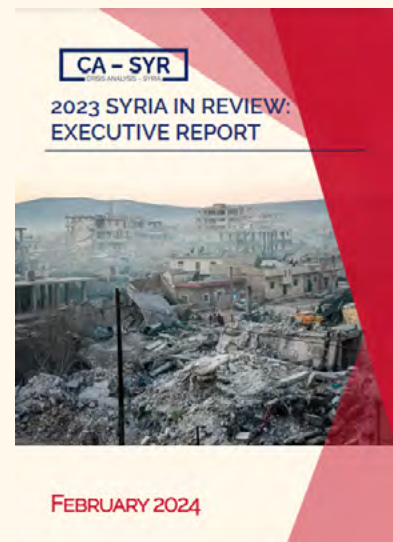
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CA-Syria Monthly Report, February 2024

The US House of Representatives passed the anti-normalization act on 14 February, making the bill ready for the Senate's vote next. In south and central Syria, the Syrian government increased the price of subsidized goods and basic services. Former opposition groups in Dar'a have seemingly united and fought together against both the Syrian government alleged ISIS-affiliates in several locations, most notably Yadudeh and Mhajeh. In northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria's Internal Security Forces seized hundreds of thousands of Captagon pills and other illicit materials in Al-Thawrah (Tabqa) and Ar-Raqqa. 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. 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.

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2023 Syria in Review: Executive Report, February 2024

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.

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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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