

Syria Monthly Report



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Overview

1 February

The Syrian government prevents a large number of people from receiving subsidies for basic goods provided through its smart card system.

2 February

Turkey launches operation 'Winter Eagle' against the alleged threat of the PKK in the northeast, displacing civilians and damaging homes and infrastructure.

3-26 February

Protests take place throughout As-Sweida in response to the government's removal of subsidies.

8 February

The WHO releases a statement committing to support health services in the northwest and calling for increased funding as COVID-19 cases rise.

27 February

Protests break out across Deir-ez-Zor against perceived corruption in the Autonomous Administration.

12-28 February

Small-scale ISIS attacks continue in the northeast, with SDF and government forces continuously combing areas of the countryside and desert to find remaining individuals and cells.

Ongoing

Protests held by teachers, residents and IDPs broke out across the northeast against HTS policies. The armed group is struggling to provide salaries and basic services in areas under its control.



Druze Sheiks join protests against the the Syrian government's removal of individuals from the smart card subsidy program. The process of removing specific individuals and categories of people has been error-strewn, apparently due to out of date data.

Image source: [Sweida 24](#)

South & central



Government removes citizens from subsidy program

The Syrian government has removed a significant proportion of its population from its smart card subsidy program. On 1 February, the card’s ‘Wayn’ mobile application informed hundreds of thousands of Syrians that they had been removed from the program without warning.

According to the assistant to the Minister of Telecommunications, Fadia Suleiman, the removal [included](#) 500,000 people (approximately 66,000 families) who met the following criteria; those who owned a 150cc-plus vehicle manufactured after 2008, and those whose father had lived abroad for over a year. Suleiman [stated](#) that specific categories of individuals were also to be removed from the subsidy program (shown right). Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection, Amro Salem, [stated](#) that those who were removed were identified using data sent by the government’s various ministries and syndicates.

Government’s decision criticized

Syrian citizens have expressed their discontent with the government’s decision and its clumsy implementation. Pro-government journalist Lina Dayoub said, when discussing the issue, that “our

neighbor in Masyaf was removed from the subsidy program because he is outside of the country, however he does not have a passport. Our colleague in the television station was removed because her father is abroad, however he has been dead for 17 years. It is clear that the Ministry of Telecommunications’ talk about accurate data collection is inaccurate.”

Salem has admitted to mistakes, citing outdated data as the cause. Salem also reminded citizens who have been removed unjustifiably to submit a complaint in case of data inaccuracy to a designated website set up by the Ministry of Telecommunication. Suleiman later told SANA on 16 February that 381,159 complaints were submitted to the website with 209,178 being processed, 70,154 of which were accepted and returned.

Categories of individuals excluded from the subsidy program

- Major importers and exporters
- Industrialists (manufacturers and factory owners)
- Major shareholders in the Damascus Securities Exchange
- Industrial city partition owners
- Owners of quarries registered in the Financial and Accounting Professions Syndicate
- Owners of transport companies
- Owners of private schools and universities
- Owners of gas stations
- Owners of technical inspection centers for vehicles
- Owners of shipping agencies
- Tourism investment owners

Subsidy reduction leads to rise in prices

Food items	February 1 (SYP per kg)	February 28 (SYP per kg)	%
Short-grain rice	4,200	5,000	19
Sugar	3,000	3,400	13
Bulgur	3,500	4,000	14
Chickpeas	5,000	5,500	10
Vegetable oil	10,000	11,000	10
Tomatoes	1,800	2,000	11

Increase in prices in As-Sweida, February 2022. (Source: HAT)

The subsidy removal comes at a time of increased [food insecurity](#) in Syria. WFP [reported](#) that 60% of the Syrian population (12.4 million) are food insecure with another 6% (1.3 million) severely food insecure. The system's abovementioned inaccuracies have left many families with limited income excluded from the program, increasing their financial distress.

Pro-government media [reported](#) that Lattakia residents complained of their inability to purchase state-supplied bread at the unsubsidized price of 1,300 SYP per packet and that designated distributors have been taking advantage of their need, selling the packet at the higher price of 1,700 SYP. Under the unsubsidized price, a family of six, which is estimated to need three packets per day, would have to pay 5,100 SYP per day (as opposed to 800 SYP) and 153,000 SYP per month (as opposed to 24,000 SYP). This has made bread increasingly unaffordable for families with limited incomes forced to pay the new price; the monthly bread expense alone is 27% higher than the highest paying government salary (120,360 SYP per month).

Prices of other food items have also reportedly increased following the subsidy removal. Local sources stated that the prices increased between 10% and

20% since the beginning of the month. Salem has [told](#) pro-government media that the increase was deliberate by traders wanting to make up for their subsidy loss.

Salem says; "some wealthy traders that have a lot of properties and cars of different kinds have increased their prices because they have been excluded from the subsidy program."

However, traders and industrialists have blamed the government for the price increase following its continuous subsidy lifting for the industrial sector, such as its decision to [increase](#) the price of oil for fuel by 6% on 14 February resulting in an increased cost of production. Indeed, it is likely that subsidy removal was not the only reason for the price increase – the Syrian pound decreased by 4% from 3,635 SYP to 3,785 SYP per USD, while the price of freight shipping increased by approximately 900%, according to media sources.

Protests in As-Sweida

Protests have taken place in various towns and cities across As-Sweida this month following the government's decision to remove subsidies. Protests took place in Qarayya, Nemreh, Shahba, Shaqa, Um Dbeib, Raha, and Gharyeh, and As-Sweida city.

Citizens reportedly forced bakeries in some towns to close down or sell their bread packets at the subsidized price. Dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of citizens, including the families of Syrian Arab Army martyrs, protested the government's decision in their respective cities and towns in city squares and in front of government buildings. Protestors also opted to temporarily close the Nemreh–Shahbah, Qarayya–As-Sweida, Shaqa–Shahba, and Majadel–Shahba roads some of which are located on or connected to the As-Sweida–Damascus highway.

Local ethnic militias present

The participation and support which local ethnic militias have shown for the protests is noteworthy.

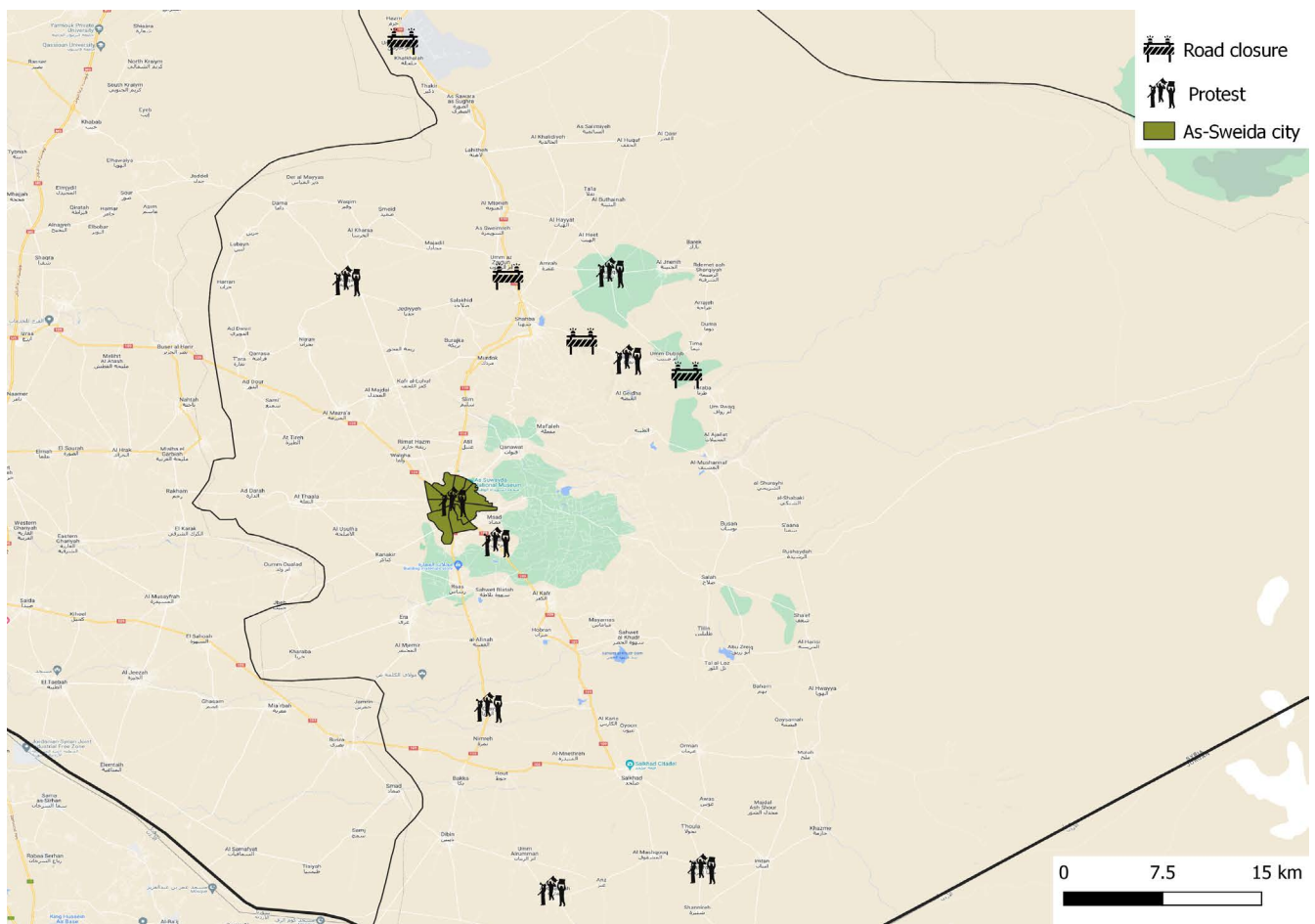
On 3 February, Qouwat al-Fahed, a Russian backed militia based in Qanawat, temporarily closed the As-Sweida–Damascus highway near Mardak township (Shahba subdistrict), later [calling](#) for a protest on 5 February and announcing that it would protect protestors. Militia groups also issued statements supporting the protests. Harakat Rijal al-Karama, another local ethnic militia released a [statement on](#) 3 February condemning the government’s “delusional decisions which aim to displace and starve the Syrian people” and warned of dire consequences as a result of the government’s “systematic policies which are contrary to the interests of the Syrian people.”

Druze sheiks support protests

The participation of Druze sheiks in later protests was also notable, as for the past few years they have

rarely been involved in anti-government movements. The Sheikhs [called](#) for a civil and democratic state which would not discriminate between its people, a divergence from protesting the government’s political economy policies. Shiekh Hikmat al-Hijri, a Druze religious leader, expressed his support on 9 February, [stating](#) that peacefully protesting arbitrary decisions is a right. Three days later he [called](#) on the government to fulfill the demands of the peaceful protestors.

Druze community leaders abroad also released statements on the As-Sweida protests expressing their support for the demands. Sheikh Mowafak Tarif, a prominent Druze community leader in Palestine held a meeting on 11 February with Druze sheiks and officials to discuss the developments in As-Sweida. In the meeting, Tarif talked about the



Sites of protests and road closures in As-Sweida governorate in February. (Source: HAT).

necessity of mobilizing international public opinion, in addition to the continuation of providing humanitarian aid to its residents.

Tarif later flew to Moscow on 14 February and met with Russian deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov, and other Russian officials, to discuss the economic and security crises which As-Sweida governorate has been facing. Lebanese Druze community leader, Sheikh Dr. Sami Abi al-Mana reportedly called Sheikh al-Hijri on 12 February expressing his “solidarity with As-Sweida city residents in Jabal al-Arab [As-Sweida governorate] who are protesting against the economic, livelihood, and social situation.”

Syrian government response

The Syrian government’s response to the protest was astute and calculated. Local sources stated that government forces present in the city [deployed](#) around government buildings in As-Sweida city to protect them. Additionally, media sources reported that As-Sweida governor Nmeir Makhoulf [met](#) with protestors and Qouwat al-Fahed representatives on 3 February to appease them. Makhoulf promised them that bread would continue to be sold at the subsidized price in As-Sweida regardless of whether residents were excluded. As the protests continued, media sources [reported](#) on government reinforcements [consisting](#) of hundreds of fighters and dozens of military vehicles entering As-Sweida, [cordoning](#) off As-Sweida city’s market, government institutions, and the square on 11 February.

Local military political actors capitalize on protests

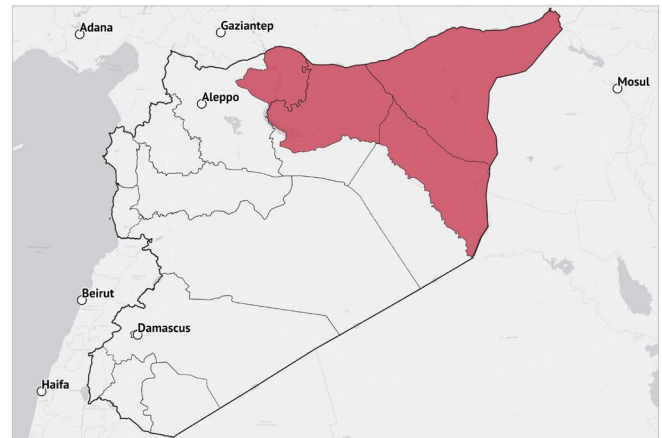
The protestors included a broad spectrum of groups in As-Sweida’s society including SAA veterans, families of SAA’s martyrs, pensioners, religious figures, and small-scale militias among others. However, local sources reported that the presence of civil society activists who had led [previous](#) protests was almost non-existent, that As-Sweida’s large familial institutions had remained silent, that the governorate’s largest and prominent militia,

[Harakat Rijal al-Karama](#), did not participate, and that the governorate’s large urban populations such as Salkhad city hadn’t participated effectively. It is expected that government militias participation in the protests aimed to capitalize on the protests to gain popularity at a time when popular support for them is waning.

Additionally, media sources reportedly [accused](#) Sheikh Mowafak Tarif of using the protests as an excuse to meet with the Russians and push for the establishment of a border crossing connecting As-Sweida with Jordan, a development which many in the governorate do not want.

Despite the widespread scale of the protests demands are unlikely to be met due to the lack of participation by the governorate’s prominent institutions or people from larger urban centers.

Northeast



Administration faces protest, ISIS and Turkish attacks

Anti-Administration protests in Deir-ez-Zor

Anti-corruption protests were held against the Autonomous Administration in the towns of Hawajej Bu Masaa, Mheimideh, Basira, Sabha, Azba, and Breiha in Deir-ez-Zor. Protestors rejected the perceived corruption of the Administration’s institu



Protests in eastern Deir-uz-Zor, (Source: [Baladi News](#))

tions, alongside the lack of provision of basic necessities, particularly shortages in fuel amid a [decision](#) by the Administration to halt its distribution on 27 February. Protestors also demonstrated against the spread of nepotism in administrative institutions, demanded the dismissal of the head of the Fuel Department within the Deir-uz-Zor Civil Council, and called on pro-Administration tribal heads to participate in the demonstrations and bring corrupt individuals to justice.

A few days earlier, the SDF had been conducting widespread search and arrest operations in eastern and western Deir-uz-Zor. This included crackdowns on smuggling operations along the eastern bank of the Euphrates. Between 11–13 February, protests also broke out against the search and arrest operations. The operations caused friction within the Arab community, which ultimately led to armed clashes on 13 February in Basira between clan members from Ghadban and Al-Jamil (both families take part in smuggling operations).

Further, on 23 February, an SDF member reportedly stormed the Directorate of Economy of the Deir-uz-Zor Civil Council in Al-Maa'amel area, and forced the head of the Economic Committee to employ a certain individual as head of the Supply Division. [Media](#) sources are reporting that he used to be a member of the pro-government National Defense Forces (NDF). When news of this broke,

civilians once more protested nepotism in administrative bodies, with demonstrations turning violent. On 23 February, armed civilians stormed the Agricultural Development Company searching for the individual. Reportedly, he is also accused of depriving local humanitarian organizations of their allocations of animal fodder. A member of the Al-Baqara tribal confederation issued a statement to the Administration, calling on him to be exiled from the governorate.

[HAT](#) has reported on corruption within the north-east administration, pointing to a trend seen within some administrative bodies and even humanitarian organizations. It is a sensitive subject within the local communities given the perceived injustice by many who believe an individual must have certain connections for their livelihoods.

Operations continue in fallout from ISIS Sina'a prison attacks

On 22 February, ISIS attacked Syrian government forces on the Ithriya road in the Badia (desert), killing and injuring an unknown number of soldiers. Also on the same day, pro-government [sources](#) reported on heavy clashes between government forces and ISIS in the Khanaser desert, east of Aleppo, while combing the area. On 25 February, ISIS ambushed Liwa al-Quds in the Palmyra countryside, killing and wounding an unverified number. Russian airplanes have also been conducting aerial raids across different areas of the Syrian desert, including near Ar-Raqqa and Homs. The attacks coincided with a military build-up as the Syrian government prepared for an anti-ISIS operation in the desert following the [ISIS prison break](#) from Sina'a prison in late January. [Reportedly](#), hundreds of fighters from the Special Task Forces had arrived in Palmyra city in the eastern countryside of Homs for a combing operation in the Palmyra desert, led by commander Imad Al-Homd.

Elsewhere, anti-ISIS operations continued post-Sina'a prison outbreak. On 13 February, the SDF's special forces unit reportedly captured the head

of ISIS's financial operations in Ar-Raqqa city. The individual is accused of funneling money for ISIS and distributing it across different areas of Syria. Further, the individual has reportedly confessed to heading an ISIS ring that threatens traders within Ar-Raqqa to pay the religious donation *zakat*. In Tabqa, local sources reported that the Internal Security Forces (formerly Asayish) captured 19 individuals accused of belonging to ISIS.

The impact on civilians has primarily been restricted to access problems, in which additional checkpoints and checks have caused movement restrictions for some. Access restrictions to humanitarian organizations have been lifted.

On 12 February, Mazloum Abdi, commander in chief of the SDF, [stressed](#) on the continued threat of ISIS in the area despite the killing of its commander, adding: "We are surrounded by ISIS ... If we don't fight ISIS now, [they] will spread again".

Abdi added that he does not believe the group will decrease their attacks, saying they work in a "decentralized" manner and adapt according to local circumstances. Abdi also assured that anti-ISIS operations will continue post the Sina'a prison attack. The repercussions of the Sina'a attack continue to be felt across the northeast, as local actors are likely to continue operations to combat ISIS.

Turkish operation 'Winter Eagle' damages homes, displaces residents

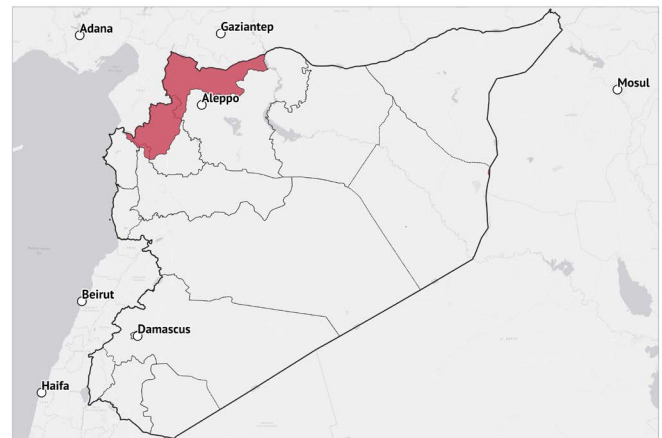
Civilians were displaced and infrastructure was damaged as a result of military operation 'Winter Eagle' that was launched by Turkey on 2 February. The Turkish defense forces stated it would be targeting the SDF and the PKK in northern Iraq and northeast Syria.

Throughout February, a number of events have taken place. A Turkish drone struck an electric station, reportedly killing four civilians who work as guards in the station. Electricity was later temporarily cut in some neighboring areas. Media sources added that

civilian homes were also struck by heavy machine guns and artillery, causing temporary displacement. A drone also struck a YPJ military vehicle in Kharza, east of Derbasiyah, killing one and injuring two. Then, residents were temporarily displaced to nearby agricultural fields as Turkish drones struck rural Derbasiyyah, with media sources indicating that SDF forces reportedly cleared their positions for fear of being targeted. One child has died and three others were wounded in Bahira reportedly via Turkish drone attacks when the civilians were passing by the Tall Habash power plant. Members of the HPC were struck in Amuda, wounding several. Sporadic attacks were also recorded in Quamishli, Ain Issa, and Menbij.

As such, sporadic attacks are likely to continue in the near to medium future, with civilian infrastructure affected by the fighting. Further, temporary displacement is also likely to occur after every attack, with the majority of displaced returning home after fighting subsides.

Northwest



Health sector underfunded in northwest Syria

WHO calls for increased funding

With a significant reduction in funding to health-care in the northwest, many organizations are look-

ing for new funding opportunities. The WHO has [said](#) that it is actively seeking funds to counteract the recent closing down of several hospitals it supports in northwest Syria. The Idleb Health Directorate also [announced](#) the opening of two oxygen production stations in Idleb and Sarmada, north of Idleb, to provide hospitals and COVID-19 treatment centers with oxygen. The two stations will cover about 45% of the deficit experienced by the region during the peak of COVID-19 infections at the end of 2021, with a production capacity of 720 oxygen cylinders per day. The Civil Defense called on civilians to get the vaccine, emphasizing adherence to COVID-19 preventative measures.

Vaccine uptake in civilians has been limited, with the number of people who have received one dose of the vaccine standing at 330,558 (7.45%) and those who have received two doses at 171,877 (4%) as of 23 February. Booster jabs are being rolled out by the Idleb Health Directorate to vulnerable and high risk groups, including medical personnel, humanitarian workers, people with chronic diseases over 18 years old, and the elderly over 60, who received the second dose six months or more ago. The third dose had been received by 5,420 people (0.12%) as of 23 February.

Health services in northwest Syria are at risk following significant cuts to funding. The health sector in northwest Syria lacks self-financing and depends on the support provided by international donors through humanitarian and international organizations operating in the region. Funding from some donors [stopped](#) last September, while in January support was cut off for 18 medical facilities that provide services to more than one and a half million civilians; these include centers specialized in providing care for COVID-19 patients, in Al-Amal pediatric hospital in Ghandoura, east of Aleppo, and in the children's ward of Mohammed Waseem Moaz hospital in Azaz city whose work is now limited to emergency cases only in the two pediatric departments.

Basic needs main priority despite arrival of Omicron variant

Cuts to health services come with an increase in numbers of COVID-19 in February, up to 66% of which have been attributed to the Omicron variant – 388 cases were registered during the first half of February, while 399 cases were recorded on 23 February alone, for example. The Syrian Civil Defense warned in a [statement](#) that more than four million civilians in northwest Syria, including more than 1.5 million people in IDP camps, are facing increased risks of severe illness as a result of the spread of the virus.

Despite the potential health burden of COVID-19, residents in the northwest are already struggling with the continued rise in the prices of food and basic commodities (foremost of which is fuel) and increasing unemployment, which is over 85%. Residents and the displaced are still recovering from harsh winter snowstorms and excessive rainfall in January, while the security situation remains precarious with continued bombardments by government forces and Russia, caused by the continued bombardment by the government forces against the northwest.

Citizens protest HTS policies

Demonstrations against the armed opposition group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham have spread throughout Idleb and western Aleppo. The group is accused of arbitrarily arresting a number of young men, and of shooting a young woman allegedly smuggling fuel from Turkish-controlled areas through the Deir Ballout crossing.

Teachers have also been protesting, asking for an improvement to living and teaching conditions. Teachers at schools involved with the Free Hama Education Directorate, who worked voluntarily for about three years, have gone on strike, demanding their salaries be paid. Some of these protests and



COVID-19 testing center in Idleb, (Source: MSF)

demonstrations resulted in confrontation with members of HTS, who tried to disperse the demonstrators.

Schools affiliated with the Free Hama Education Directorate announced a strike to limit the marginalization of the educational process in the region and demanded that salaries be granted to dozens of teachers who worked voluntarily for about three years. The teachers called on government departments responsible for education to restore teachers' rights and improve salaries. The Ministry of Education of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) issued a statement, promising to find emergency solutions to which would include the volunteer teachers, asking teachers to return to their work.

Educational facilities in northern Syria are divided into NGO-supported schools, those supported by the SSG's education directorate, and independent schools. Dozens of schools lack even a permanent structure, and lessons are taught in temporary shelters or tents.

Teacher protests are new in SSG-administered areas, however teachers in the Turkish controlled Syrian Interim Government (SIG)-administered areas have held demonstrations and strikes over the past few months, demanding better salaries. In response, some local councils in northern Aleppo decided to increase the salaries of its employees, including teachers.

Protesters demand release of prisoners arrested by HTS

Protestors have also come out against the arbitrary arrest and detention of civilians by HTS. People from the villages of Deir Hassan, Sahara and Tala-da have demanded the release of detainees held by HTS for more than a year. Many of these detainees were arrested on accusations of belonging to rival opposition groups Hurras Ad-Din and Hizb al-Tahrir, and remain in HTS prisons.

The Shura council in the villages invited civilians to demand the release of detainees, to allow visits to prisoners and to ask for due judicial process, including the disclosure of charges and the appointment of lawyers to the prisoners. The demonstrators raised banners bearing slogans such as; "Arrests will not deter us", describing HTS policy as "arbitrary, unjust and muzzling."

In western Aleppo, in Deir Hassan, Sahara and Babka, similar protests took place against arbitrary detention, however people also called for HTS to do more in its resistance against the Syrian government and its forces.

Shooting of woman leads to further violence

Additionally, demonstrations took place in camps around Atma demanding HTS accept accountability for shooting a woman near the Atma-Deir Ballout camps. She was accused of transporting fuel from the areas controlled by SIG in the countryside of Aleppo towards Idleb, through the Deir Ballout crossing, on 10 February.

IDPs clashed with HTS, throwing stones against the security forces – HTS brought in riot police who intervened and deployed near the crossing and arrested civilians and a media activist from the Umm Al-Shuhada and Sfuhun camps on the pretext of inciting riots. Local media sources circulated news of HTS members firing over the heads of the demonstrators in an attempt to disperse them. A state-

ment by Deir Ballout crossing stated that the camp residents attacked HTS members near the crossing and burned a caravan and three motorcycles.

To ease the tension, the Liberated Areas Administration, an HTS-affiliated opposition governing body, issued a statement that the judiciary would follow up to hold those involved to account. It is mentioned that HTS prevents fuel from entering from SIG areas – there are some rumors that this is to force civilians to buy Turkish-imported European fuel that is imported through Turkey which is more expensive than the local fuels coming from the SIG areas.

HTS faces increasing public dissatisfaction

The increased number of demonstrations during the past two months represent a state of increased public dissatisfaction from HTS and SSG policies and practices in the region. It also indicates public willingness to express their anger regardless of HTS security forces and the fear of being arrested.

This popular rush to demonstrate and demand improvement in their living conditions and to oppose HTS with its security policies is the result of the accumulation of many negative practices of HTS and the SSG, which directly affect their daily life, instead of seeking to improve their living conditions from their position as bodies responsible for managing the area in terms of governance and security.

Sugar shortages in Idleb

There have been significant sugar shortages in markets in Idleb throughout February. The SSG's PR director at the Ministry of Economy and Resources, Hamdo al Jassem, [claimed](#) that importing sugar to the northwest has been a challenge over the last two months, but the impact of the problem has been less pronounced due to the presence of sugar reserves. Jassem further [cited](#) the end of contracts with importing Turkish companies and the difficulties facing land transportation across the Syrian-Turkish borders due to bad weather conditions as

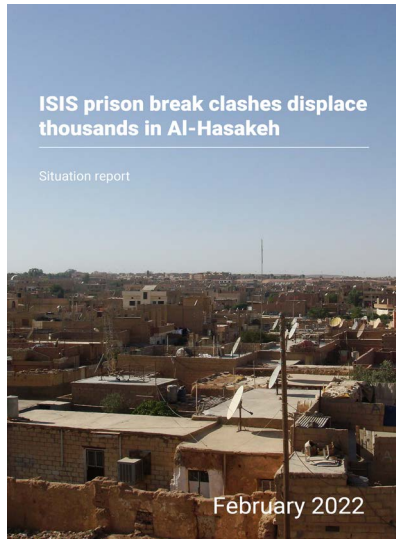
the main factors contributing to the current shortages. Additionally, PR director for the Bab al-Hawa crossing's administration, Mazen Alloush, [claimed](#) that sugar shortages are a consequence of global attempts to monopolize the commodity and limit its production.

Locals themselves however are blaming HTS for shortages, after information circulated that armed opposition group has recently [exported](#) around 250 tonnes of sugar to Autonomous Administration-held areas in the northeast; yet there are no official sources to confirm this. Local merchants have added that importers suddenly [stopped](#) the sale of sugar in Idleb's markets, which they see as an attempt to monopolize the commodity and consequently raise its price. The price of sugar has reached \$55 per kg in recent days, a \$20 increase in price since January 2022.

In its attempts to curb monopolization and stabilize prices, the SSG's Ministry of Economy and Resources issued a circular on 26 February, fixing the price of sugar at \$38.5 per 50 kg. The Ministry also fixed the price for wholesale merchants at \$38.75 per 50 kg and the retail price at \$0.9 per kg (or its equivalent in Turkish lira), demanding that all merchants openly declare their sugar prices and keep record of their official invoices. The stabilization of sugar prices is contingent upon the SSG's supply patrols' ability to monitor the implementation of the Ministry's circular, as well as the Ministry's ability to secure alternative sources of sugar.

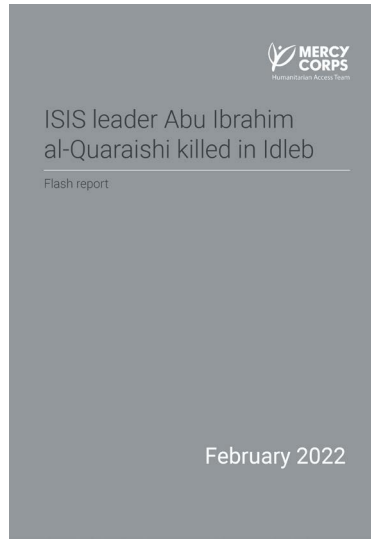
The current sugar shortages reflect underlying economic challenges in the northwest that are driven by the [absence](#) of political, security, and monetary stability, as well as the near-absolute economic dependence on Turkey, which is preventing the region from harboring its own independent economic decision-making.

February publications...



ISIS prison break clashes displace thousands in Al-Hasakeh

In late January, ISIS conducted a wide scale attack on Sina'a prison in Ghweiran neighborhood, Al-Hasakeh city, in an apparent attempt to break out prisoners held under accusations of ISIS affiliation. The humanitarian ramifications of the attack continue to be felt, as thousands have been displaced from the neighborhoods, and stricter security measures have been put in place.



ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Quaraishi killed in Idleb

ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Quaraishi was killed in Idleb during a raid led by US commandos. The assassination of Quraishi just two weeks after the prison attack in Al-Hasakeh city may be an indicator that the international community and International Coalition forces predicted a recurrence of similar large-scale activities and forecasted an increase in ISIS attacks.

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The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. HAT's most important function is to collect and analyze disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT 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.

