

Syria Monthly Report



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Overview

Ongoing

Economic conditions worsen in northwest Syria, with prices of basic commodities increasing, and wages and employment opportunities decreasing. High fuel prices, import shortages, a reduction in humanitarian aid and the unstable value of the Turkish lira are primary causes.

Bread shortages worsen throughout south and central Syria, while government attempts to mitigate by reducing allocations and changing distribution fail.

Syrian government forces and the SDF are in a low-level stand off in areas of Aleppo and Al-Hasakeh city, where each have besieged areas controlled by the other. Both sides deny culpability.

1-15 April

A number of people have been sick with water poisoning in Dar'a, with poor maintenance of old water pipes and proximity of water supply to sewage blamed.

13 April

The Syrian Central Bank devalues the pound once again, by 12% from 2,500 to 2,800 SYP per USD. Previous devaluations have followed significant national and international events, and this most recent is likely due to the financial strain on the government as a result of Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

19 April

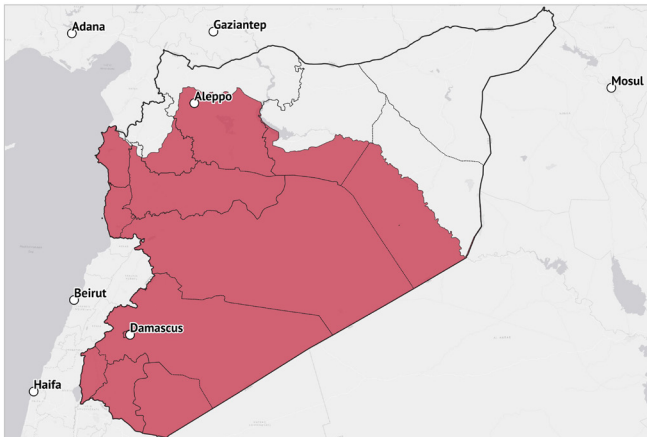
ISIS announced a new global operation *Al Tha'er Lil Shaykhain*, a revenge operation in response to the killing of former ISIS commander, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, and former ISIS spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi, in February. Forty-two attacks were recorded over nine countries in the first three days of the announcement. In the Syrian northeast, there were increased ISIS attacks on civilians at the beginning of Ramadan.



ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was killed by US forces in Idleb in February. In late April, the new leadership launched a global operation of revenge – citizens in northeast Syria have been targeted.

Image source: Ghaith Alsayed/AP

South & central



Bread crisis intensifies in government-held areas

The bread crisis intensified this month as the Syrian government seemingly failed to provide enough flour for bakeries to produce at full capacity. Citizens have been unable to receive their daily allocations of bread, while several complaints have been lodged regarding the low quality of bread being produced. Additionally, it appears that government attempts to make bread distribution in Damascus and Rural Damascus more efficient have failed, increasing prices and making bread increasingly inaccessible for many.

Reduced wheat allocations lead to decreased bread production

Bakeries have been unable to produce enough bread for residents following the government's reduction of flour allocations.

In Aleppo city, extensive queues have formed at bakeries – city bakeries have [reportedly](#) been closing early after running out of bread to sell. The city reportedly has had its flour allocations reduced by 25% since 30 March, while bakeries were asked to

make flour and yeast provided for one week last for up to 13 days. Additionally, designated distributors have been selling one subsidized bread packet per family regardless of its size.¹

In Tafas city, residents have been receiving bread two days per week instead of daily, after the city's flour allocation was [halved](#) from 10 to 5 tonnes per day from the start of April. Residents have also complained that bread which is produced is inedible because of improper milling and use of expired flour.

In Rural Damascus, flour allocations were reportedly [reduced](#) by 20% with local sources stating that the government has requested that bakeries in the governorate prolong its use akin to Aleppo. Additionally, local sources stated that the Sahnaya public bakery, which serves 1.5 million residents in Rural Damascus, has closed for renovation, consequently adding pressure on bakeries in neighboring Darayya and Kisweh and further reducing bread availability.

The subsidized bread shortages have left residents with private bakery bread (tourism bread) as the only alternative to fulfill their bread needs. However, its price has increased by 94% from 1800 SYP per packet on 14 February to 3,500 SYP on 1 May, making it 1075% more expensive than subsidized bread and increasingly unaffordable for many limited income families.

New distribution mechanism in Damascus and Rural Damascus

In addition to reduced allocation of flour, the Syrian government decided to impose a new bread distribution mechanism in Damascus and Rural Damascus on 5 April. The mechanism only allows citizens to purchase bread directly from bakeries in the governorate where they were issued their smart card, while purchasing bread from designated dis-

¹ Families receive a [specific](#) number of bread packets under the smart card depending on the number of family members.

tributors is open for everyone in any location.² The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection [stated](#) that the mechanism's aim is to reduce queuing, facilitate distribution, and crack down on the illegal sale of subsidized bread. However, the mechanism has complicated matters, making bread purchasing more difficult for many residents who either live or work in a governorate where they were not issued their smart card, forcing them to travel long distances to acquire their bread rations. Such trips have become increasingly expensive with the recent spike in fuel prices following a steep reduction in supply since late February.³ Also, designated distributors have been unilaterally [selling](#) subsidized bread packets at 500 SYP per packet, twice the official price, making it more unaffordable for limited income families.

Government fails to secure sufficient wheat imports

The intensifying bread crisis indicates that the Syrian government is running low on wheat. Two days before flour allotment reductions to public bakeries began, media sources [reported](#) that the strategic wheat and flour reserves would not last more than 20 days.

The government has struggled to import wheat since the Russian–Ukrainian conflict began for several reasons. Media sources reported that Russia, the government's main wheat supplier, has refused to supply the Syrian government with new wheat shipments due to economic difficulties the country has been facing since the start of the conflict. Moreover, a member of the Baath leadership, Mahdi Dakhlallah, [told](#) pro-government media on 24 April that wheat shipments coming to Syria from Romania have been halted, implying that sanctions were the reason. However, the government's ina-

bility to afford wheat shipments may be the main reason; Saer Chiha, the Rural Damascus domestic trade and consumer protection director, [stated](#) that the price of one tonne of wheat increased six-fold since the start of conflict, with media sources [adding](#) that the shipping price has exceeded \$400 (from \$317 per tonne previously). Additionally, the government has been unable to secure an alternative wheat supplier, as negotiations to purchase 200,000 tonnes of wheat from India last month failed.

Government supports local wheat production

Noting the difficulty which the government is facing in importing wheat, it has continued to assist farmers in domestic production and is aiming to encourage local wheat procurement. On 9 April, the General Director of the General Authority for the Management and Development of Forests, Awfa Wassouf, [stated](#) that farmers will be receiving 5 liters of diesel per dunam from 10 April, and will be able to purchase any additional liters needed at the black market rate. Wassouf added that a total of 250,000 liters of agricultural diesel will be provided for farmers.

Also, the General Director of Electricity and Transportation and Provision Establishment, Fawaz al-Thafer, said that farmers will be provided with electricity through special electricity lines at 80 SYP per KW "with the objective of supporting agricultural production, particularly wheat."⁴

Moreover, head of the Farmers Syndicate, Ahmad Ibrahim [said](#) that the government is planning on increasing its wheat purchasing price to encourage farmers to sell their produce. Akram Afif, a consultant for the Chamber of Agriculture, [stated](#) that the planned purchasing price will be a minimum of 2,500 SYP per kg to cover all production costs including diesel, fertilizer, plowing, pesticides, har-

² For example, a resident registered with their smart card in Rural Damascus, can only buy bread from bakeries inside the governorate. They would not be allowed to buy from a bakery in Damascus city but could from a designated distributor inside the city.

³ The price of one liter of black market petrol in south Damascus increased 114% from 2800 SYP per liter on 14 February to 6000 SYP on 17 April.

⁴ The special lines provide 24/7 electricity at the price of 80 SYP per KW while normal electricity lines, subjected to cuts, are priced at 300 SYP per KW.

vesting, and transportation. The purchasing price increase may also aim to encourage farmers from Autonomous Administration-held areas to sell their produce to the government.

Chronic bread shortages likely to continue

Subsidized bread shortages in government-held areas is a [chronic](#) issue which has gradually intensified since September 2020 as the government's resources have depleted. The current issues are particularly concerning as they come at a time of increased [food insecurity](#) and inability of the government's main ally and wheat supplier, Russia, to fulfill the country's wheat needs due to economic constraints imposed by its conflict with Ukraine. The effects have been apparent, with the reduction in flour allocations to public bakeries reported in many governorates and cities in addition to the reduction in bread quality, a symptom of successive bread crises.

Additionally, the government's attempts to support wheat cultivation and encourage procurement may not come to fruition, denying potential local wheat supply. Director of Hama's Grain Establishment, Khaled Jakish, has said that this year's wheat harvest is not expected to exceed last year. Also, it is possible that the Autonomous Administration may [block](#) the sale of locally produced wheat to the government as it did last year, rendering its procurement attempts futile.

Noting the import difficulties and the expected low level of local wheat production, the government has continued to ration and guide distribution. However, its successive distribution mechanisms has made access to bread increasingly difficult and has recently drawn criticism from government officials.

Syrian MP Zuheir Tintawi [criticized](#) the Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection, Amro Salem, for being unable to find a proper mechanism for bread delivery, adding that shortages had worsened following the ministry's attempts to amend the distribution process. With shortages

being primarily a supply issue, implementing new distribution mechanisms are unlikely to have a significant impact on citizens' access to bread.

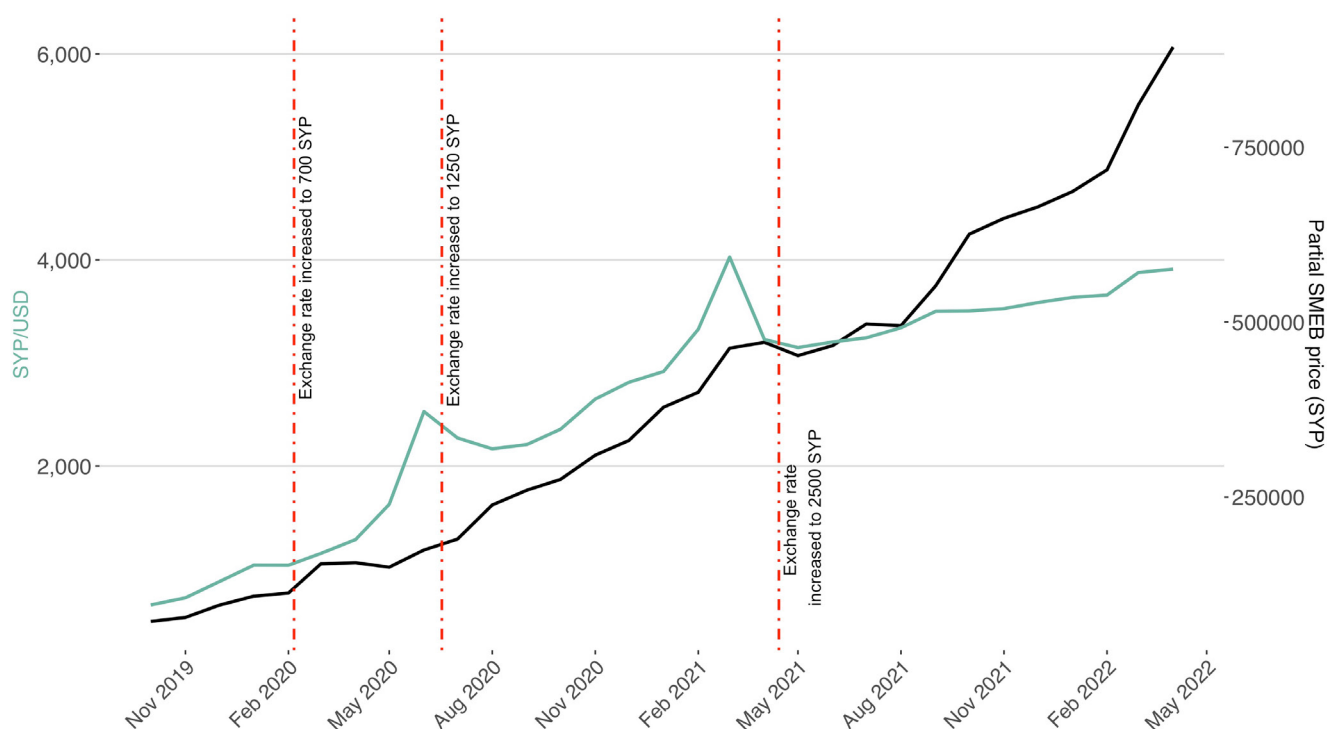
Syrian government devalues Syrian pound

The Syrian Central Bank devalued the Syrian pound by 12% on 13 April from 2,500 to 2,800 SYP per USD.

The Central Bank [stated](#) that the devaluation was for reasons "pertaining to the global economy which has seen high inflation levels, increase in commodity prices and transportation fees which was directly reflected on local markets."

The statement added that the new exchange rate will also be applicable to transfers conducted by International NGOs and the UN through Western Union, the monetary transfer and exchange company, to "strengthen organizations' ability to work in Syria", in addition to encouraging those sending transfers into Syria to do so through the official channels.

The Syrian pound's devaluation usually follows steep depreciation, a significant increase in prices, and economic shocks (shown below). As have been regularly seen, past devaluations have generally followed significant economic events. The pound was officially devalued to 700 SYP per USD in February 2020, four months after the Lebanese banking system collapsed and the government's subsequent [struggle](#) to stabilize the currency. It was later devalued to 1,250 SYP per USD in June 2020 following the implementation of the Caesar Act which government officials forecasted would have a significant impact on the economy. It was then devalued in April 2021 to 2,500 SYP per USD after the currency's black market rate reached an all-time low in March 2021, exceeding 4,000 SYP per USD. The current devaluation follows the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict which has put further financial strain on the Syrian government, leading to a 6% depreciation.



Devaluation of the Syrian pound (Nov 2019 - Feb 2022)

Cases of water poisoning reported in neighborhoods of Dar'a city

Since early April, numerous cases (estimated between 200 and 1,200) of water poisoning have been reported at the Dar'a National Hospital, SARC medical units, and private clinics, with patients [coming from](#) Al Sabil, Al Qusoor, and Al Matar neighborhoods in Dar'a al Mahatta (shown below). Local and media sources indicated that common symptoms included dizziness, continuous vomiting, diarrhea, high fever, and less common [symptoms](#) of hepatitis C, kidney failure, and skin diseases.

The Assistant Director of the Dar'a Water Company, Riad Masalma, [indicated](#) that the source of the pollution stemmed from a worn-out mains water pipeline which overlapped with a blocked sewage pipeline, while others pointed towards [sewage flooding](#) at the Ash'ari Basin, which feeds Dar'a city and some villages in its eastern countryside, as another contributing factor.

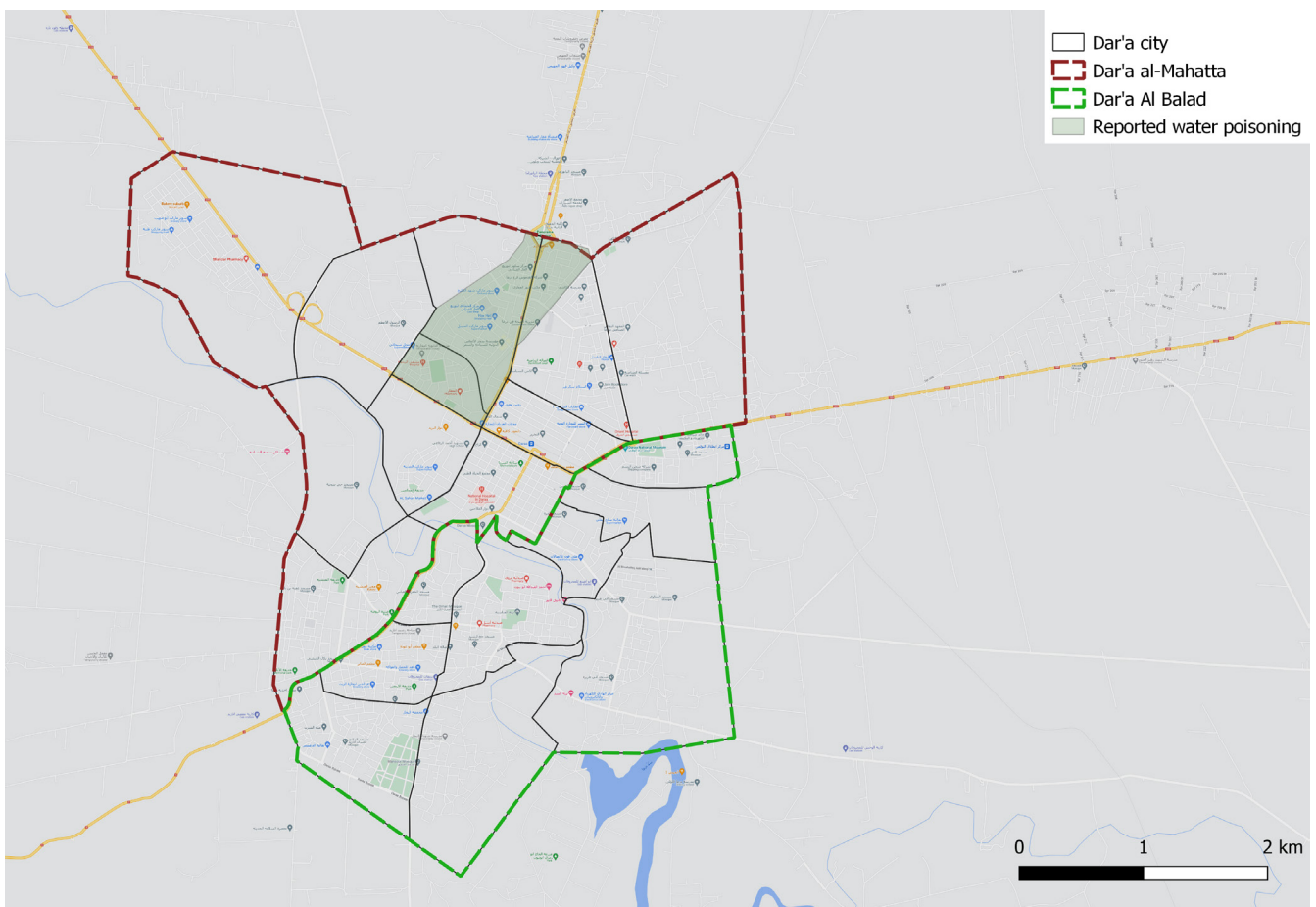
On 7 April, the Dar'a Water Company [announced](#) a comprehensive clean of the water network in the impacted neighborhoods; it requested residents to keep their water taps open and to report any suspicions regarding the quality of drinking water, until inspection and maintenance activities had taken place. Moreover, it distributed sterilizing chlorine pills for the residents to clean their water tanks. Additionally, the director of Dar'a's sewage company, Fares Othman, [stated](#) that the company's team, in coordination with the City Council, the Drinking Water Company, and the Directorates of Health and Environment, led the sewage network inspection activities. On 13 April, the Dar'a Water Company announced on its official Facebook page the [completion](#) of maintenance activities, specifically the replacement of the damaged 30-meter pipeline, adding that subsequent water sample tests revealed that it was no longer contaminated and therefore safe to use.

Dar'a Water Company accused of discrimination in water provision

Despite resolving the current source of water poisoning, underlying issues surrounding water provision in Dar'a city remain. The city of Dar'a, and the governorate in a broader sense, continue to suffer from a significant lack of government investment in improving service provision, with locals and their expatriate relatives having to pay for their own improvement [initiatives](#) when it comes to maintenance and small-scale development activities. Discrimination in service provision is clear, with local sources claiming that in Baath City and Khan Arnaba (in Quneitra governorate) the government's investment and response to issues is far greater. Although accusations of preferential treatment may be valid, the overall level of service pro-

vision in those areas can also be attributed to the lower level of damage sustained in Quneitra during the conflict.

Locals continue to voice their [discontent](#) with the Dar'a Water Company's overall policy. For instance, several residents on local social media complained about inequitable water supplies within the Al Sabil neighborhood. Others reported that neighborhoods located at higher altitudes within the city continue to suffer from lack of proper water supply. In terms of water tankers, which are largely unaffordable (estimated between 15,000 and 20,000 SYP per tanker), areas such as Raqqat Awda in Al Sabil neighborhood have not been served recently by either the water network or water tankers. This is not to mention the numerous complaints about discriminatory water supply in Dar'a al Mahatta.



Map showing neighborhoods where water poisoning cases have been reported

While the current issues of water poisoning and poor water supply discussed here are taking place in Dar'a al Mahatta, the situation in Dar'a al Balad, the part of Dar'a which hosts significant anti-government opposition, is relatively worse and tends to be even more marginalized.

Sieges in Aleppo and Al-Hasakeh

Throughout April, government forces have continued to [besiege](#) the Autonomous Administration-controlled Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods of Aleppo city, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). The siege, which reportedly [started](#) in mid-March, has resulted in severe restrictions on the entry of basic commodities, particularly flour, fuel, and medical supplies. In the aftermath, bakeries in the neighborhoods were closed due to flour shortages, while prices increased due to supply interruptions. As a retaliatory measure, SDF forces have been reportedly besieging government-held security squares in the cities of Al-Hasakeh and Qamishli since 8 April, also [denying access](#) of flour, fuel, and food items into these areas.

Although there is no clear and substantiated explanation for the escalation by government forces, the increased access restrictions may likely be linked to clashes between government soldiers and the SDF at a State Security checkpoint on 13 March which killed a Fourth Division soldier and wounded two others. [Reportedly](#), Fourth Division soldiers opened fire towards a vehicle carrying sugar supplies which refused to stop at a State Security checkpoint (al-Jazira) just outside the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood. As the matter developed, media sources indicated that the Fourth Division has denied access to [vehicles carrying flour](#) into the two neighborhoods since early April. Laila Hassan, the co-chair of the neighborhood's Health Council, [confirmed](#) that restrictions also limited the supply of fuel, food items, and medicine.

Consequently, significant [price increases](#), estimated between 60–100%, were recorded within the neighborhoods, resulting from the interruption of supply lines as well as the government's imposition of taxes at the surrounding checkpoints. Furthermore, locals have reported not receiving their daily allocations of bread from Administration-run communes

Box 1

Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods

Alongside Ashrafiyah, the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood constitutes the only remaining pocket of Autonomous Administration control in the city of Aleppo. [Located](#) on an elevation in northern Aleppo, the area overlooks the [strategic](#) Castello Road, which ties the city's eastern and northern outskirts. The People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), a militia made up of Kurdish majority, some Arabs and foreign volunteers, have exercised military control over the area since 2016, after [failed attempts](#) by Islamist and Turkish-backed armed opposition groups to capture it. The two neighborhoods, have populations ranging between 150,000 and 200,000, host a community of Arabs, Christians, in addition to a majority of Kurds, most of whom were [displaced](#) from Afrin following Turkey's Olive Branch military campaign in 2018.

Governance and local administration are exercised through several [communal bodies](#) in both neighborhoods, under the umbrella of an Administration-affiliated [Joint General Council](#). The Internal Security Forces (*Asayish*) man checkpoints within and at the neighborhood's entrance, whereas the government's Fourth Division and State Security members control the Jazira and Sekke checkpoints at Sheikh Maqsoud's entrance. While the two neighborhoods have witnessed interrupted periods of besiegement by government forces in the last three years, media sources indicate that access restrictions have intensified since Fourth Division members [deployed](#) into the area over a year ago.

due to the [depletion of flour reserves](#). In light of the bakeries' inactivity within the Ashrafiyah and Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods, residents have had to buy their bread from [government-operated bakeries](#), a problematic option given that it entails additional transportation costs for many residents.

Media sources pointed out that government soldiers and the SDF have failed thus far to bring forward a [resolution](#) to the current sieges, despite several rounds of negotiation. Officially, both parties have eluded responsibility for the sieges in Al-Hasakeh and Aleppo governorates. For instance, the official spokesman for the SDF-affiliated Northern Democratic Brigade, Mahmoud Habib, [refuted](#) claims that SDF forces were besieging government-controlled areas in al Al-Hasakeh. Similarly, the pro-government governor in Al-Hasakeh, Major General Ghassan Halim Khalil, [denied](#) the besiegement of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods, adding that the issue there has to do with government's inability to provide unlicensed bakeries in the two neighborhoods with flour supplies.

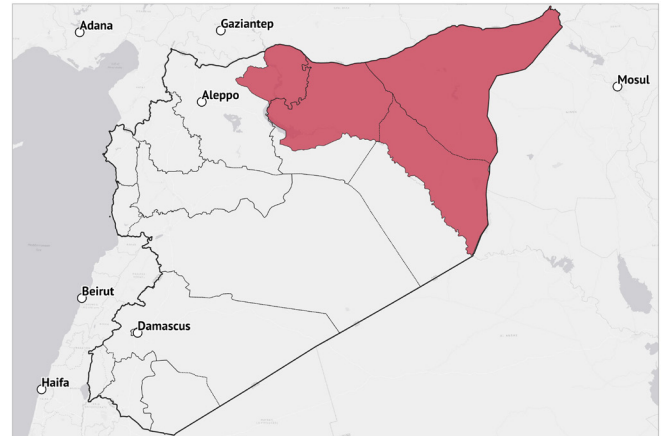
Residents protest Fourth Division siege

Meanwhile, on 9 April, locals organized a [protest](#) near the Yassine Hospital in Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood, demanding an end to the Fourth Division's siege and the lifting of imposed access restrictions. Media sources then reported that Fourth Division members [allowed](#) the entry of food items on 12 April following a meeting between government and SDF representatives in Qamishli, but this claim was [refuted](#) by tribal leaders of the two neighborhoods shortly thereafter.

As things currently stand, the ongoing siege and access restrictions will continue to threaten both food security and local livelihoods in the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods on a daily basis. In a broader sense, the conflict dynamics in these areas, as is the case in Al-Hasakeh governorate, exemplify the nature of the relationship between Damascus and the Autonomous Administration: It appears that neither parties are looking for a significant escalation at the moment and rather prefer to

engage in a cautious tit-for-tat interaction, which largely comes at the expense of locals in both zones of control.

Northeast



ISIS announces new global revenge operation

On 19 April, an ISIS spokesperson announced on Telegram the launch of a new global operation *Al Tha'er Lil Shaykhain*, a revenge operation in response to the killing of former ISIS commander, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, and former ISIS spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, in February. [News](#) reports have indicated that the campaign is global: Forty-two recorded attacks occurred over nine countries in the first three days of the announcement. In the Syrian northeast, April saw increased ISIS attacks throughout the beginning of the month of Ramadan.

ISIS attacks on civilians

On 4 April, local sources reported that a number of shop owners, traders, pharmacists, and livestock owners in northern Deir-ez-Zor had received threatening letters attributed to ISIS. The documents reportedly included messages demanding they pay *zakat* (obligatory charitable donations under Islamic law) or face punishment. A few days

later, on 11 April, local sources reported that a number of traders in eastern Deir-ez-Zor received threatening WhatsApp text messages, also demanding they pay *zakat*. This is the second recorded incident in two weeks. Further, in Shiheil, a civilian was attacked after refusing to pay *zakat*, where suspected ISIS members threw a hand grenade at his house. This is a continuous trend witnessed particularly in Administration-held Deir-ez-Zor.

Also, in one of the largest attacks this month that affected civilians, local sources reported that on 27 April seven civilians were killed and several others were wounded in an ISIS attack in Fneijin village in Abu Khashab, in northwestern Deir-ez-Zor. Reportedly, armed men stormed the house of former Deir-ez-Zor Civil Council head of relations, Nouri Al-Hmeish, while he was holding an *Iftar*. Hmeish was killed, alongside the area's Mukhtar, and five other civilians. Skirmishes between attendees and the attackers ensued, with the ISIS members retreating on their motorbikes. ISIS claimed the operation via their official Telegram channel, stating it was part of the *Al Tha'èr Lil Shaykhain* revenge operation.

ISIS attacks SDF, Syrian government forces

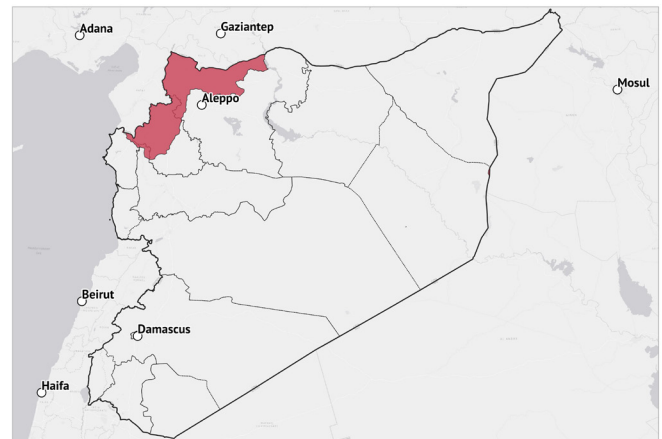
Besides attacks on civilians, ISIS also conducted attacks against the SDF and Syrian government forces. On 5 April in Hajin, ISIS [killed](#) two SDF members after ambushing them with small and medium weapons. On 25 April, local media reported that ISIS conducted an attack on an SDF vehicle, killing five in northwestern Ar-Raqqa. ISIS also shot at and killed an SDF member in Mheimideh, western Deir-ez-Zor. On 29 April, [media](#) sources reported that ISIS had ambushed government soldiers in the Bishri mountains, killing an unspecified number. Local sources confirmed that as a result of the increased ISIS attacks, pro-Iranian forces deployed in Albu Kamal and around the T2 oil fields. Russian air forces were also active in the Rasafa desert.

In certain northeastern communities, ISIS remains a threat even after the death of their former com-

mander in February. The SDF has taken measures to try and contain the security situation, including not allowing the free movement of motorcycles in some Deir-ez-Zor communities, as well as conducting a number of search and arrest operations in Ar-Raqqa subdistrict. For example, on 26 April, local [media](#) reported on an arrest operation in Hwayjat Al-Sawafi, an IDP camp in Kasrat, south of Ar-Raqqa city. An unknown number of individuals were arrested. These types of operations are not a novel counterterrorism measure.

ISIS remains capable of amassing its fighters and conducting guerilla warfare on both governing actors in the northeast. With its announcement of its new global operation, as well as its announcement of its new leader, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi, in March, it is vital to continue to keep a close eye on ISIS activity and their effects on civilians in these Syrian communities.

Northwest



Economic conditions worsen in northwest during Ramadan

Economic conditions continue to decline in northwest Syria due to the significant increase in price of fuel, bread, vegetables, fruit and other basic commodities since the beginning of Ramadan. The

lack of job opportunities, low worker wages and the Turkish lira’s continued depreciation are also contributing factors. The price increases have affected the living situation and purchasing power for both residents and IDPs in the region, posing a direct threat to food insecure families suffering from malnutrition and deteriorating health conditions.

The Response Coordination Group (RCG) documented an increase in food prices by 33.4%, wheat by 42.3%, vegetable oil by 62%, and meat by 34%. Moreover, fuel prices fluctuated during the month (shown below).

Price increases ‘result of conflict’

According to Abdul Hakim al-Masri, Minister of Economy in the Syrian Interim Government, the increase in price of basic items is due to the global rise in oil and gas prices and freight shipping costs attributed to the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. The conflict had a clear impact on northwest Syria, where most of the materials such as sugar, oil,

ghee, medicine and pesticides are imported, wages are low, and local agricultural production is lacking due to unsuitable climatic conditions. Despite the minister’s justifications, civilians, activists, media workers and workers in NGOs in northwest Syria launched a social media campaign protesting the increase in vegetable and fruit prices. They demanded a boycott of vegetables and fruits, blaming traders for the high prices – traders are accused of increasing prices during Ramadan.

Price hike coincides with reduced humanitarian response

The price increases have coincided with a 34% decrease in humanitarian response operations by local organizations compared to the first two days of Ramadan last year, according to the RCG. The decline in response rates was mainly attributed to the lack of funding and the concentration of organizations’ work in specific areas. The humanitarian response rate reached 14.8% in villages and towns harboring IDPs, 12.3% in regular camps, 6.8% in random camps, and 3.7% in villages that receive returnees; organizations still consider these areas unsafe to operate in because of their proximity to the frontlines, especially in Jabal al-Zawiya south of the M4 highway.

The price hike also coincided with the WFP reducing the value of calories in the food basket provided by the program for the fourth time, by 171 calories. In a [statement](#) on 8 April, the RCG called on the international donors to increase support for the region, warning that these reductions could mean increased levels of severe food insecurity.

	22 Mar (USD)	9 April (USD)	17 April (USD)	24 April (USD)
Imported petrol	1.162	1.173	1.173	1.162
Imported Diesel 1	0.970	0.935	0.935	0.935
Refined Diesel 1	0.504	0.504	0.550	0.550
Enhanced Diesel	0.668	0.668	0.710	0.710
Gas cylinder	12.63	13.08	13.08	13.08

Fluctuating fuel prices, northwest Syria

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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.

