

Syria Monthly Report



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Overview

27 July – 25 August

Attacks and counterattacks by US forces, Iranian-backed armed groups and military bases in the northeast have coincided with the revival of the Iran nuclear deal. Although unlikely to either escalate or significantly affect negotiations, these attacks are interpreted as different actors testing each other, in demonstrations of their capabilities.

1–31 August

Clashes between the Syrian government, Turkish forces and the Syrian Democratic forces in northwest Syria kill and injure civilians and soldiers. The strikes show that despite signs of improved relations between Ankara and Damascus, no actor is willing to give up ground without concrete political agreements.

10 August

The Iraqi immigration ministry announces plans to repatriate 150 families from Al-Hol camp, – the Autonomous Administration and Iraqi officials continue to work together to repatriate Iraqi citizens from the camp.

11 August

Comments by the Turkish foreign minister hinting at improved relations with the Syrian government spark protests across opposition-held northwest Syria. Although civil protest against normalizing relations was strong, there are signs that support for Turkish governance in some areas is waning.

18 August

The Syrian government lifts its siege on Tafas city, originally

implemented to capture alleged ISIS affiliates.

Ongoing

The Syrian pound has depreciated to a low of over 4,500 SYP per USD, affecting prices of basic commodities, most notably food and fuel. Policy changes by the government and Central Bank are failing to alleviate unaffordability and shortages.

Restrictions and arrests of journalists and dissenters in the Autonomous Administration continue to be of concern, while the SDF has increased its vigilance against espionage in the context of threats of a Turkish incursion.



At the XIII Ambassador's Conference in Ankara in August, statements by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Turkey's foreign minister, came close to advancing the suggestion of a political resolution to the situation in Syria, and therefore cooperation with Damascus. The comments sparked protests across the northwest, with opposition supporters vehemently opposed to the idea.

Summary

Several trends continued throughout August, particularly in south and central Syria. The Syrian pound, already depreciated, fell to a low of over 4,500 SYP to the dollar. This has had knock-on effects to affordability, particularly of fuel and food in the southern governorates. Attempts by the Central Bank to mitigate financial losses and control foreign currency reserves are limited, while the Syrian government has cut subsidies for many basic items, further depressing its citizens.

In terms of security, government forces lifted their siege on Tafas city, initially implemented to catch alleged ISIS affiliates. The siege prevented farmers from tending or harvesting their crops, impacting local market economies. Additionally, local armed groups in As-Sweida continue to fight against those affiliated with the government, particularly its Military Intelligence Directorate, in an attempt to purge crime and corruption.

In the northeast, in Al-Hol camp, the Iraqi government has expressed intentions for the future of the camp through the repatriation of Iraqi citizens. The Ministry of Immigration's spokesperson, Ali Abbas, stated that the government is approaching its set target of repatriating 500 families during 2022 – there have reportedly been four waves of repatriation this year, compared to two in 2021.

Concerns over the arrest and restrictions on journalists and other vocal groups by the Autonomous Administration have also surfaced: the threat of a Turkish incursion has meant many within the administrative and security forces are hypervigilant for spies and other informants.

Protests spread throughout the northwest, against a statement made by the Turkish foreign minister perceived to suggest a rapprochement and the re-establishment of relations between Damascus and Ankara. Leaders throughout the northwest called for Turkey to continue to support the 'revolution.' In contrast to political sentiment, attacks continued between the Syrian Democratic Forces, Syrian National Army, and the Syria government – a political reconciliation is unlikely to be reached in the short term, and in the meantime, no side is likely to back down militarily.

Small-scale attacks and counterattacks took place in eastern Syria, around International Coalition military bases, and, in response, against Iranian-affiliated armed groups. The attacks coincided with a revisit to the Iran nuclear deal, in which both Iran and the US are part of discussions. Progress has been slow, and discussions have stalled without firm agreements in place.

Cover photo: Protests against improved Turkish relations and potential negotiations with the Syrian government over northwest Syria. (Source: Middle East Eye)

Economic indicators

	June 2022	July 2022	August 2022
SYP/USD official exchange rate	2,800	2,800	2,800
SYP/USD parallel market rate	3,991.7 (0.7%)	4,050.1 (1.4%)	4,391.2 (7.8%)
TRY/USD official rate	16.90 (7.1%)	17.4 (2.9%)	18.0 (3.2%)

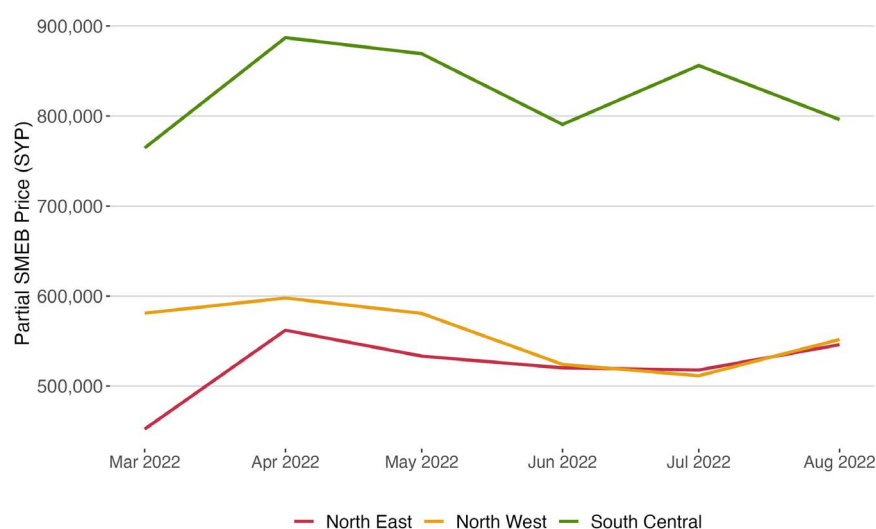
Economic indicator 1.

Official and parallel market exchange rates, SYP/USD and TRY/USD, June–August 2022



Economic indicator 2.

SYP/USD and TRY/USD, January 2020–September 2022



Economic indicator 3.

Change in partial SMEB price by zone of control, March–August 2022

HAT's 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 fruits.

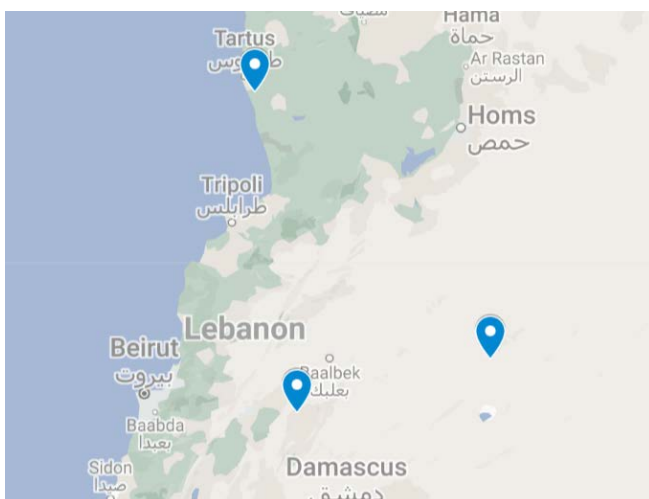
Whole of Syria

US, Israeli and Iranian attacks coincide with revival of Iran nuclear deal

Tensions between the US-backed International Coalition, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), and Iranian-backed armed groups increased in northern Syria, following a number of incidents that included artillery shelling and drone strikes in Deir-ez-Zor, rural Al-Hasakeh, and Rural Damascus governorates. Attacks between the US and Iran-backed groups are not a new feature of the Syrian conflict; however, the increased recurrence and volume of these attacks over the past year is an indicator of the heightened tensions in the region, coinciding with an uncertain conclusion to negotiations regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iranian nuclear deal).

Rockets hit US bases, Israelis strike government targets

Four rockets were fired at and around US forces housed at the Shaddadi patrol base in rural Al-Hasakeh, with no casualties recorded. This incident, which took place on 27 July, led to a counter operation by Coalition forces, in attempts to locate the attackers.



Site of IDF airstrikes on Iranian and Syrian targets.
(Source: HAT Syria)

On 14 August, IDF warplanes [attacked](#) a number of both Iranian and Syrian government targets in Tartous, Qalamoun, and Rural Damascus, including the Abu Afsa air base which hosts a number of pro-government armed groups.

One day after the IDF airstrikes, aerial drones [targeted](#) the US-controlled [al-Tanf base](#); one was intercepted, and one destroyed. The drones were later [identified](#) as Iranian-manufactured, and reportedly launched from Iraq. On the same day, there was an attempted rocket attack on Coalition forces and the SDF, near the Green Village military base – there were no reported casualties, however several unexploded rockets were recovered.

On 23 August, Col. Joe Buccino, communications director for US Central Command, [announced](#) further action, at President Biden's direction. The statement reads:

“At President Biden’s direction, U.S. military forces conducted precision airstrikes in Deir ez-Zor Syria today. These precision strikes are intended to defend and protect U.S. forces from attacks like the ones on August 15 against U.S. personnel by Iran-backed groups. The U.S. strikes targeted infrastructure facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.”

In retaliation, Iranian-backed militias [launched](#) rockets at the Conoco gas field in Tabieh and Al-Omar oil field in the Green Village in Deir-ez-Zor. The US responded, killing and wounding of several pro-Iranian and/or Iranian combatants in [al-Mayadin](#), Deir-ez-Zor.

Iranian strikes test US retaliation

Since 25 August, US strikes on Iranian-affiliated armed group positions, no retaliation from Iran or its allied groups against US forces was recorded in Syria. It is likely that Iran's aim in carrying out these attacks was not to change the status quo or force US forces to withdraw from any oil field or military base, considering the US' entrenchment in the Syrian context and its interests in the region. On the contrary, Iran's operations likely aimed to test US

willingness to engage in direct military action and explore the extent of leeway afforded to Iran in Syria amid advanced talks of the nuclear deal renewal.

The confrontations took place as a potential breakthrough in the Iran–US nuclear deal talks was [reported](#), with Iran reportedly dropping several of its demands in efforts to facilitate an agreement. Such developments received backlash from Israel, the US' primary ally in the region, with Naftali Bennett, the Israeli prime minister, [urging](#) the US to discontinue the ongoing talks.

The US' other primary ally in the region, Saudi Arabia, a country that would also see its oil revenues drop in case a deal with Iran is struck due to the projected influx of Iranian fuel to the global market, has previously stated its [opposition](#) to the Iran deal and recently made a [donation](#) of \$3.5 million to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – the UN's watchdog agency investigating Iran's nuclear program.

At the time of reporting, no announcement of a nuclear deal has been made. While the [US has decoupled](#) confrontations with Iranian-backed groups from the JCPOA negotiations, many Syria observers fear that a failure of the current negotiations will increase confrontations between Israel and Iran, with Syria as the primary theater; in this sense, it is likely in the [Syrian governments' interest](#) for the success of the negotiations. Should JCPOA negotiations fail, however, it is uncertain how Iran's calculus will change in the region, particularly with respect to the US' continued presence in Syria. For its part, Israel will likely continue to target an increasingly entrenched Iranian presence regardless of a JCPOA revival, unless the negotiations stipulate otherwise or a more influential actor, such as Russia, intervenes.

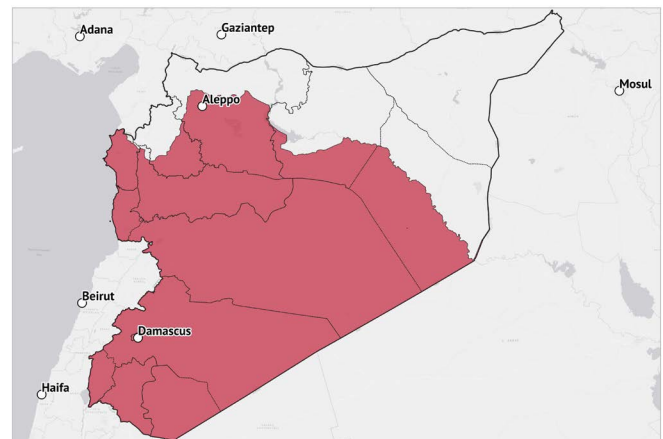
Russia pressures Iran to leave posts in Syria

With an uptick in both US and Israeli airstrikes against Iranian and Iranian-affiliated positions in Syria, sources [indicate](#) that during a Russian–Iranian meeting at the Hama military airport, Russian

officials demanded that Iranian groups relinquish control of a number of positions in Hama and Tartous governorates. This comes as Russia reportedly fears strikes in proximity to IDF strikes targeting Iranian positions, similar to the [attack](#) carried out on al-Hamidiya community in southern Tartous this past July.

While the possibility of a large-scale Iranian pull-out from Syria is highly unlikely, Russia's demand that Iranian militia leave certain posts in Hama and Tartous and previous Russian [attempts](#) of reducing Iran's influence in southern Syria are indicators of a growing friction between the two actors in Syria. While direct military confrontation in Syria between Russia and Iran can be ruled out, Iran may be prompted to seek new allies and further increase its influence on communities in areas such as Deir-ez-Zor. As such, Turkey's interest in [strengthening economic ties with Iran](#), as demonstrated by its president's, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's, recent visit to Tehran, which may be a source of hope for the latter.

South & central



Depreciation affects prices in government-held areas

The Syrian pound has once again depreciated to its lowest ever level, at over 4,500 SYP per USD, for the second time since March 2021. The depreciation, down 14% in the last two months alone (from

3,995 to 4,540 SYP per USD), has coincided with month-to-month food price increases (of up to 100%) and shortages of certain items. Additionally, both subsidized and black-market fuel prices have notably increased. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer protection [increased](#) the price of subsidized and unsubsidized petrol by up to 127% while sources stated that black market prices for fuel products such as diesel increased by 25%.

Depreciation follows signs of depleting foreign currency reserves

Ten years of protracted conflict have devastated the [Syrian economy](#) and financial structures: poor monetary policy, corruption, sanctions on Damascus and its supporters, and the Lebanese financial crisis have accelerated the pound's depreciation – the recent depreciation follows signs that the Central Bank's foreign currency reserves have depleted further. This is supported by both new policy decisions, and the fallout on the black market and with traders: in order to constrict spending, the government has continued its subsidy removal policy, preventing seven categories of people, based on various criteria, from receiving subsidies. It has also increased the price of subsidised fuel, and reduced [bread rations](#).

The Central Bank has also [stopped](#) funding most imports, in an effort to preserve its foreign currency reserves, resulting in market price increases.

Finally, sources have said that foreign currency supply on the black market has become scarce due to increased demand for it by traders coupled with the seeming absence of foreign currency injections into the market.

Attempts to mitigate currency decline

The absence of sufficient foreign currency reserves, coupled with an ailing economy, have limited the Central Bank's ability to intervene in the market to stymie the pound's collapse. The Central Bank has resorted to several measures to try and halt the currency's continuous deterioration, the first being crackdowns on unofficial exchange and monetary

transfer companies and other actors considered to be engaging in currency speculation.

On 14 August, the Central Bank stated that it “continues to follow and monitor Syrian pound transactions in the foreign currency market and will intervene by taking the necessary measures to stop the individuals engaging in currency speculation and manipulating the exchange rate.”

The Central Bank is also reportedly [reducing](#) the money supply, potentially through issuing treasury bond bids, and introducing electronic payment systems. However, in the absence of a strong economy and sufficient foreign currency reserves, such measures are unlikely to stabilize the Syrian pound in the long-term.

The Humanitarian Access Team will be publishing a situation report providing further details regarding the economic situation in government-held areas.

Syrian government lifts Tafas siege

On 18 August, Syrian government forces lifted their twenty-two-day siege on Tafas city following an agreement between the Dar'a security committee and the Tafas negotiations committee on 13 August. Government forces, which had been stationed around the city since 27 July, reportedly [withdrew](#) towards the irrigation station in Mzeireb township and Dar'a city. Before they withdrew, they set up a temporary military position in the city's cement distribution building, for stop and search operations for individuals wanted by the government (allegedly affiliated with ISIS – these actions had been agreed to during the negotiations).

Siege implemented to capture ISIS combatants

The siege, and subsequent military action, were implemented as deterrents against the presence of alleged [ISIS combatants](#) in Tafas city – government forces would end the siege if wanted individuals left the area. However, even after former-opposition leader and negotiations committee member, Khaldoun al Zo'bi, [announced](#) their departure on 8 August to “avert bloodshed,” government forces

remained in their positions and continued intermittent bombardment. Media sources later stated that the siege would continue until government forces could confirm the departure of the specific individuals.

The siege was characterized by intense clashes and intermittent shelling. Government forces attempted to [advance](#) into the city on 11 August towards the Qasr al-Dheima building in Tafas city, after [re-inforcements](#), including additional heavy weapons, were deployed the day before. However, former-opposition fighters successfully rebuffed the attack. In parallel, government forces intermittently [shelled](#) the city's outskirts and surrounding agricultural fields using anti-aircraft gunfire, mortar rounds, and tank shells, reportedly resulting in dozens of casualties and material damage.

Central Committees' become obsolete

Central committees were notably absent during the siege and did not partake in negotiations with the government. The Tafas Central Committee was absent from the scene and was instead replaced by an ad-hoc group called the 'Tafas negotiations committee', formed of, among others, former opposition leaders Khaldoun al-Zo'bi, Mohamad Jad-Allah al-Zo'bi, and Abu Monzer al-Dehni. Media sources [attributed](#) the absence of the Central Committee to the assassination of a significant number of its members, however, it is also possible that its members have seen their influence become ineffective and chose not to intervene (as also happened in Dar'a al Balad in August).

Sheikh Faisal Abazid, a committee member of the Dar'a al-Balad Central Committee, [announced](#) the dissolution following Friday prayers, stating that the committee's presence or absence wouldn't make a difference and denounced accusations that they are working for the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). Abazid held the city's tribes and families responsible for negotiating with the government and preventing another government offensive.

Military operations impact on local economy

The siege and subsequent military operations have harmed the city's local economy. The city's farmers reportedly incurred significant financial losses as a result of the occupation of agricultural fields by government forces. This prevented them from irrigating or cultivating crops, and many were unsalvageable by the end of the siege. Farmers were warned not to approach their fields, which either had contained a military position or were potential targets for indiscriminate shelling. A delegation of farmers [visited](#) the Dar'a governorate's Baath party leader during the siege, to request access to their lands, however were unsuccessful. The city's traders have reportedly faced economic loss due to reduced market activity and a two-fold drop in sales. Traders also [feared](#) that a bombardment or assault on the city might damage their stocks, causing them to decrease procurement and consider warehousing current stock outside of the city, at a high cost.

Tafas healthcare workers called for questioning

The siege also coincided with Tafas healthcare workers being [called](#) for questioning. Intelligence officers from the MID reportedly asked ten nurses and doctors serving in the Tafas National Hospital to report for questioning, allegedly threatening them with the arrest of their families if they did not. Media sources later noted that they were interrogated because they provided medical assistance and treated individuals wanted by the Syrian government.

Healthcare workers have previously faced difficulties in their work – many whose reconciliation with the government in July 2018 was reportedly [refused](#), were not rehired by the Ministry of Health, and work as volunteers without a salary; their precarious status has led these workers to become vulnerable to harassment, arbitrary detention, and extortion. Moreover, following the siege, media sources [stated](#) that the Dar'a Health Directorate has yet to provide medical supplies to the hospital, whether intentionally or due to a lack of medical supplies, forcing patients to purchase the necessary items and medicines needed at their own expense.

It is important to note the provision may be due to low medical resources as public hospitals across government-held areas are suffering from a shortage in medicine and medical equipment.

Instability likely to continue in Dar'a

The recent withdrawal of government reinforcements from southwest Dar'a reduces the possibility of a significant escalation in the short term. However, the withdrawal does not necessarily mean that the security situation will improve. Assassinations continue in Dar'a governorate with the last noteworthy one targeting the abovementioned Khalidoun al-Zo'bi, and Tafas negotiations committee member and former-opposition leader of Fajr al-Islam. Zo'bi, along with four of his companions, were killed in an [ambush](#) on the Yadudeh–Dar'a road.

Additionally, it is unclear what the inactivity and dissolution of Central Committees in the governorate will mean. The Tafas and Dar'a al-Balad Central Committees were formed in July 2018 following the reconciliation and tasked with liaising between the government on behalf of the local population. These Committees had negotiated with the government during previous sieges to help reach an agreement, worked on reducing intra-communal tensions, and met with the government to secure the release of recently arrested residents. Their absence leaves a gap, where previously they contributed to stability and de-escalation in the governorate.

Siege part of government strategy to increase control

The Syrian government has besieged several communities which it considers to be either troublesome, former-opposition strongholds, or both since reconciliations in July 2018. Sieges and the threat of military operations have been a cost-efficient [tactic](#) for the government to impose its demands and further cement control over communities and their surrounding areas, particularly at times when the bulk of its forces are engaged elsewhere; fighting in the north on the front with the opposition, conducting anti-ISIS operations in the desert (Badia),

or deploying in northeast Syria to prevent a Turkish offensive. Indeed, Tafas alone was besieged more than three times in the past few years and has conceded more to the government with each passing siege; the government managed to return its security branches and civil departments to the city. The government seems to be continuing this strategy, besieging Jasim yet again for approximately the third time. Government forces have tightened the partial siege which they imposed on the town last month. Local media [stated](#) that new military positions have been set up and pre-existing checkpoints have been reinforced. Additionally, government fighters have deployed to agricultural fields denying farmers access to them all the while reconnaissance drones could be seen hovering overhead. The government likely intends to continue using this tactic to further cement its control over the governorate with Jasim likely being its next target.

Local militias continue crackdown in As-Sweida

As-Sweida governorate has witnessed a continued crackdown against local armed groups affiliated with the MID. Following the [dissolution](#) of Qouwat al-Fajr and the disappearance of its leader Raji Falhout, local militias conducted raids and issued threats to other MID-affiliates making it clear that they could be next. Local militias reportedly raided Qanawat township two times in August in search of Bayraq al-Fahed's leader Salim Hmeid and members of his group while other MID-affiliates were either threatened and laid low or issued statements dissolving themselves.

Local militias storm Qanawat township

[Harakat Rijal al-Karama](#), a prominent local armed group in As-Sweida, reportedly [deployed](#) hundreds of fighters to Qanawat township on 29 August upon the request of Druze Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and other community leaders in search of Salim Hmeid. Harakat Rijal al-Karama asked town residents to cooperate with their fighters as they conducted their raids and patrols in the town; the fighters arrested four individuals for suspected af-

filiation with Hmeid during the operation but later [released](#) them.

The deployment came after Merhej Jaramany, Liwaa al-Jabal's leader, released Hmeid in Qanawat township after no other group or community leader would host him. Hmeid turned himself in to Liwaa al-Jabal on 15 August in exchange for his brother's release and following the [raid](#) conducted in the town by local militias to arrest him on 11 August. Local sources stated that Jaramany contacted Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri to hand over Hmeid but the latter refused, he was not able to hand him over to the Syrian government after complaints by residents that such a course would not bring him to justice, and he did not hand him over to Qouwat Sheikh al-Karama out of fear that they would execute him. However, it is noteworthy that he did not contact Harakat Rijal al-Karama, potentially indicating tension or competition between both sides.

MID-affiliates avoid disbanding

Local sources stated that the Mezeher family's MID-affiliated militias have been laying low in an attempt not to draw attention. Following the Qouwat al-Fajr's demise the group's leader, Mohanad Mezher, reportedly [announced](#) on social media his group's official formation under the name 'Sayf al-Haq', possibly in preparation to succeed the Qouwat al-Fajr. However, the announcement was later quickly removed as it drew criticism from residents who posted about the group's criminal activity. Local sources stated that Sayf al-Haq has been notably mute the past month to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Additionally, the MID-affiliate under the leadership of Nasser al-Sa'di in Salkhad city, issued a [statement](#) on 13 August dissolving itself in cooperation with the Harakat Rijal al-Karama. The statement mentioned that the group's members linked with security agencies would disband, cease all military activity on the ground, and Nasser would hand over his weapons to the Salkhad city council. However, this statement drew [criticism](#) and was considered insincere and would not bring them to justice for their criminal activities.

Local militias takeover improves security

Local sources reported that the security situation has improved in As-Sweida governorate and that the local drug trade, particularly chemically produced drugs such as captagon and other amphetamines, has slightly scaled back since the Qouwat al-Fajr's demise. Local militias have been going after other MID-affiliated groups who took part in criminal activity and terrorized the local population. These militias, particularly the Harakat Rijal al-Karama, have only increased in prominence with residents calling for them to manage the disbanding and disarmament of said groups. The recent events also enabled some to rebuild bridges with other actors as well. For example, Laith al-Balous and Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri reconciled after the former's militia took part in the 11 August raid in Qanawat township. Indeed, As-Sweida's local militias are increasingly being seen as playing the primary role in maintaining security with the absence of a strong government presence in the area and helping the local community heal its wounds.

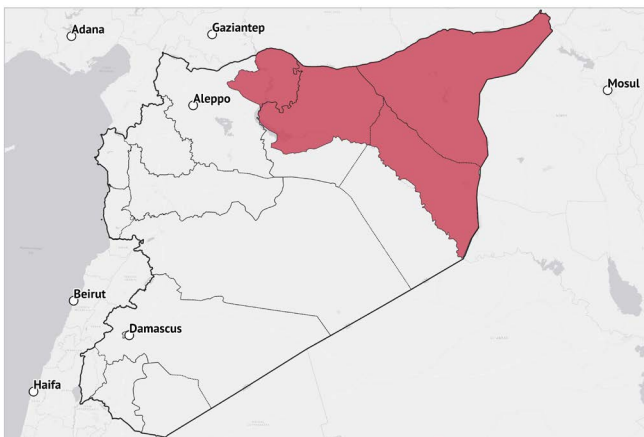
Despite the militia's growing role, the government still retains strong influence. Local sources stated that State Security are in contact with the Harakat Rijal al-Karama and that Liwaa al-Jabal, a former MID-affiliate, switched sides and now works with State Security. It is possible that the current events are part of the process of switching one overarching security agency with another whose modus operandi may be more subtle than its predecessor.

Moreover, these local militias are drawing criticism themselves: Local sources stated that the Harakat Rijal al-Karama drew criticism during its raid on Qanawat township on 29 August after its fighters physically assaulted residents who peacefully objected to the raid. Masked Harakat Rijal al-Karama fighters were also seen, for the first time, patrolling the town. The use of masked fighters by the Harakat Rijal al-Karama is unprecedented and reminded many residents of raids conducted by security agencies who hide their fighters' identities. Also, Harakat Rijal al-Karama fighters reportedly threatened local activist Mohanad Shehabeddine after he

[criticized](#) the governorate's local militias.

It is expected that the purge of MID-affiliates in the governorate will continue, potentially increasing stability in the governorate. However, the above-mentioned actions raise fears that the local militias bent on removing criminal groups may eventually start to behave like them, resulting in the eventual return of instability to the governorate.

Northeast



Repatriation of Iraqis from Al-Hol camp

The Autonomous Administration and the Iraqi government continue to coordinate their efforts towards the repatriation of Iraqi refugees from the Al-Hol camp in eastern Al-Hasakeh governorate, with sources pointing that a new cohort of families, approximately 700 individuals, left the camp between 11–13 August. The camp currently hosts individuals spanning 51 nationalities, with Iraqis [comprising](#) an estimated 50% of its population. In this regard, the Iraqi government's willingness to repatriate its citizens is particularly notable, in contrast with the [complications and challenges](#) of hypothetical return and/or repatriation of the camp's inhabitants.

On 10 August, the Iraqi Ministry of Immigration

and Displacement [announced](#) the transfer of 150 families from the Al-Hol camp towards the Jeddah-1 camp, located around 20km south of Mosul city in Ninawa governorate. In parallel, local and media sources [reported](#) that between 30 and 50 detainees – Iraqi citizens accused of ISIS affiliation – were also handed to Iraqi authorities by the SDF. Joyce Misuya, assistant secretary general at OCHA, [indicated](#) that the majority of returnee families were female-headed households, while some required medical attention. Ahmad al-Jabbouri, an official at Ninawa governorate, added that the security status of the transferred families has been [approved](#) by Iraqi security services, adding that the families are destined to arrive at the Jeddah 1, a temporary IDP camp where returnees are [subject](#) to integration/rehabilitation and psychosocial support programs before returning to their communities of origin.

Repatriation a 'complex process'

According to Karim al Nouri, from the Iraqi Ministry of Immigration, repatriation is a complex process which requires meeting several [key conditions](#) for return, including tribal reconciliation and clan approval, rehabilitation, and availability of suitable housing. That said, government agencies, NGOs, and community figures cooperate and participate in various stages of the repatriation. For instance, the security screening of returnees, and logistics-related matters of the transfer process is reportedly [handled](#) by Iraq's National Security Service, while the Ministry of Immigration's responsibilities are limited to providing aid and shelter for the incoming families.

Moreover, incorporating the stances and concerns of the Iraqi host communities has also been a key feature of the repatriation process, given the detrimental impact ISIS rule incurred upon social and community cohesion in its previous area of control. A good recent example on this was a 23 June meeting held by the Iraqi Ministry of Immigration with community leaders from Ninawa governorate, alongside the participation of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNDP, and the National Security Advisory of Iraq; while stressing

the importance of security screening measures and unwillingness to welcome individuals who have committed crimes on behalf of ISIS, local community leaders also [acknowledged](#) that children of ISIS-affiliated families cannot be blamed and stigmatized for their parents' affiliations. Meanwhile, Sheikh Malla Mansour, a community leader from Ninawa, [emphasized](#) the importance of perceiving those cleared for repatriation as victims of ISIS rather than affiliates of the extremist group and praised the role of local peacebuilding organizations fighting stigmatization and revenge acts against returnees.

Iraqi government states intent for repatriations

Looking ahead, the Iraqi government has expressed intentions to facilitate the [‘dismantlement’](#) of the Al-Hol camp through the repatriation of Iraqi citizens. The Ministry of Immigration’s spokesperson, Ali Abbas, stated that the government is approaching its set [target](#) of repatriating 500 families during 2022 – there have reportedly been four waves of repatriation this year, compared to two in 2021, in May and September. Regardless, the future of Al-Hol camp continues to remain unclear.

Arrests of journalists and restrictions on freedom of the press in northeast Syria

Amid increased attacks in Autonomous Administration-controlled areas in Syria and rising tensions with Turkey, the SDF has recently launched a series of arrest campaigns targeting journalists, civilians, and members of its own institutions.

In late July, the SDF launched operations in Al-Ha-sakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Aleppo governorates, to target ‘spies and agents,’ under the premise of cooperating with Turkey and sharing information; at the time of reporting, at least 36 individuals, likely more, have been arrested.

According to the [statement](#) published by the general command of the SDF there exist “spy networks,”

which are receiving instructions from Turkish intelligence to attack the SDF, leading to heavy casualties and posing a “significant threat to the region’s security and stability.”

Local sources indicated that this operation has also targeted journalists and media professionals working within Autonomous Administration institutions, with accusations that they have been disseminating military and public security-related information to the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. Furthermore, according to media and local sources, the SDF has [reportedly](#) imposed restrictions on using smartphones with GPS capabilities, ostensibly for self-protection.

In the recent escalation of arrests, the SDF raided public places and headquarters of media agencies in Ar-Raqqa, arrested [16 journalists and media professionals](#), and accused them of espionage. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, a human rights organization, the detainees were reportedly prevented from contacting their families, accessing or receiving legal assistance, and were at risk of torture and ill-treatment in detention. Unconfirmed reports from local sources added that some detainees were released after pledging to suspend their work in the media sector or refrain from criticizing the Autonomous Administration.

Furthermore, the Autonomous Administration requested a list of names of journalists and media professionals from its affiliated committees in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, with the aim of [regulating](#) their work.

Introduction of red tape restricts media

In parallel to physical safety and security concerns, local sources indicated that obtaining official approvals or renewing licenses to work in the media sector constitute major obstacles for journalists and media professionals in northeast Syria. In March 2022, the media department of the Autonomous Administration issued a decision that stipulates certain [requirements](#) to be fulfilled by journalists and media professionals to continue work in the media

sector – this is not uncommon practice, however a new measure introduced [requires registration](#) with the ‘Union of Free Media’, a group with a potentially restrictive mandate.

Reporters Without Borders have previously demonstrated how the process to receive media credentials is leveraged by local authorities to restrict and control journalists’ access to and sharing of information; according to their [report](#), journalists who have tried to cover Turkish attacks in Al-Hasakeh governorate, have been denied official approvals. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights suggested that similar to measures limiting the work of journalists during previous military operations in northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration has [imposed](#) restrictions on freedom of press under the pretext of ensuring the safety of journalists and complying with security considerations.

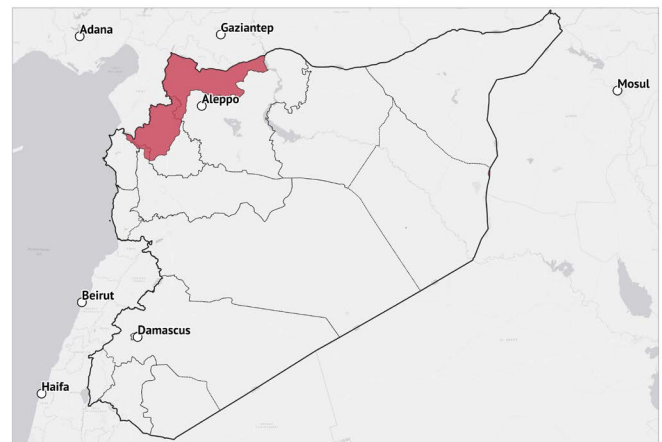
Notably, local sources explained that several previous arrest campaigns, which are not directly linked to tension with Turkey, indicate political rifts within the Autonomous Administration, rather than security concerns, as an additional motive of the SDF. For instance, in early 2022 Rudaw and Kurdistan24, both Kurdish media companies, were suspended in northeast Syria, due to intra-Kurdish [tensions](#). Media sources indicated that unidentified actors have raided Rudaw’s office multiple times, [arrested](#) members of the media outlet, subjected them to torture, and confiscated their documents and equipment.

This has been followed by the [arrest](#) of other journalists in northern Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, who were accused of distorting the image of respective authorities, after reporting on socio-economic issues faced by civilians in those regions. Additionally, the SDF recently [imposed](#) curfew in several villages in Deir-ez-Zor to conduct arrest campaigns that targeted, among others, activists who have organized demonstrations to demand improvement in living standards from the local authorities.

While the curfew imposed during the arrest cam-

paigns targeting a number of journalists and activists is not directly linked to humanitarian actors, continued arrests, potential curfews, and further restrictions on movements may increase in case a Turkish military escalation takes place or increased localized tensions increase, potentially causing access issues in certain areas. Additionally, concerns surrounding Turkish surveillance may also cause disruptions to telecommunications network quality and availability, compelling the Autonomous Administration to increase its own surveillance in return.

Northwest



Turkish Foreign Minister’s statement sparks demonstrations across northern Syria

On 11 August, a controversial statement by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Turkey’s foreign minister, concerning a potential rapprochement between the Turkish and Syrian governments sparked a wave of popular protests in various locations across northwest Syria.

The scope and scale of this local response indicated a widespread stance among civilians and combatants alike that any future settlements would not be accepted without the removal of Bashar al-Assad as president of Syria. The protests also have exposed

the uneasy nature of Turkey's position, in northwest Syria, particularly related to maintaining a balance between its role as the direct sponsor of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and a key regional power with a set of strategic interests overlapping and conflicting with other regional stakeholders.

Turkey's potential decision to normalize relations with the Syrian government will have significant implications on several pending issues, including the anticipated Turkish military offensive, the returnees portfolio, as well as political and security arrangements that would characterize the post-conflict era.

Within the framework of the XIII Ambassador's Conference, [held](#) in Ankara during 8–11 August and entitled 'Wise and Compassionate Turkish Diplomacy on the Eve of 2023 and Beyond,' Çavuşoğlu indicated that he had a brief conversation with his Syrian counterpart at the Non-Aligned Movement's Conference¹ in Belgrade in October 2021.

Recalling the conversation, Çavuşoğlu [stated](#) during the Ankara conference that "[Turkey] should find a way to reconcile the opposition and the regime in Syria, otherwise sustainable peace will not be achieved." Ankara's publically evolving stance towards the Syrian government was bolstered in another statement by Erdogan on 19 August, where the Turkish president [claimed](#) that "Turkey's aim is not to defeat Assad but rather to reach a political solution."

Again, on 23 August, Çavuşoğlu further [added](#) that there are no Turkish preconditions for a dialogue with the Syrian government. While it is early to conclude that imminent steps towards Turkish–Syrian normalization will take place, practical steps towards the realization of Turkey's foreign policy shift towards Damascus will likely usher in a new era in the Syrian conflict, most directly to the political and security dynamics governing territories in northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates.

Following Çavuşoğlu's statement, demonstrators took to the streets across northern Syria, both in

Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)-held territories, denouncing all talk of reconciliation and asserting that ousting Assad remains their ultimate objective. On 11–12 August, media and local sources reported that major [protests](#) took place in A'zaz, Al Bab, Afrin, Bab al Salameh, Mare', Jarablus, and Ras al-Ain. Protestors raised [slogans](#) such as: "Normalization with Assad is a Crime;" and, "No Alternative to Toppling Assad."

Local sources pointed out that a significant number of demonstrations were called for and organized by the United Revolutionary Front (URF), a civilian coalition which encompasses notable opposition figures from several governorates and maintains a strong relationship with tribal leaders. The URF [organized](#) demonstrations in various locations in Aleppo governorate on 19 August under the slogan: "We are Revolutionaries Not Opposition – Down with Assad", then again on 26 August under the slogan: "We Demand the Unification of the Syrian National Army and the Resumption of Frontline Confrontation".

Interestingly, the URF's mobilization of the population in northwest Syria was not only limited to the issue of normalization, but expanded to tackle local grievances about the SNA's fragmentation and occasional [intra-SNA clashes](#) over crossing revenues. While the majority of demonstrations remained



Protestors in A'zaz, northwest Syria. (Source: HAT Syria)

¹ The conference is a forum of 120 countries that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc

peaceful, the 12 August protest in A'zaz caught particular attention, after several protesters reportedly [burned](#) the Turkish flag and were consequently [arrested](#) following a joint operation by the Turkish Intelligence and the A'zaz military council.

At the official level, political and military entities in northwest Syria also commented on Çavuşoğlu's statement, carefully balancing between the need to embrace the local discontent and maintain a diplomatic tone towards Turkey. For example, on 11 August, the SSG's Department of Political Affairs both praised Turkey's instrumental role in supporting the opposition while [warning](#) that a 'revolution' should not be utilized as a political bargaining tool by any state or entity. On 12 August, the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council affirmed the people's right to oppose normalization, adding that reconciliation with the Syrian government is equivalent to making peace with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and ISIS, thus sending an indirect message to Turkey.

In contrast, local councils in [A'zaz](#), [Suran](#), and [Mare'](#) unequivocally stated that reconciliation with the Syrian government is a betrayal of the opposition's purpose of revolution. Similar responses were issued on 11 August by commanders of SNA factions, including the [Suleiman Shah Brigade](#), [Hamza Division](#), [Levant Front](#), [Tha'eroon Liberation Assembly](#), among others. It is worth noting that the majority of responses, in Idleb and Aleppo alike, avoided the direct reference to the Turkish foreign minister or Turkey more broadly, given the latter's fundamental role as the state sponsor of the SNA and the de facto guarantor of the territorial status quo in Idleb governorate.

There have been exceptions, however, to this trend; according to local sources, the Free Bar Association, a central syndicate encompassing opposition-affiliated lawyers from all governorates, called for suspending Turkey's sponsorship of the the Syrian opposition, toppling individuals and entities that engage in political dialogue with the Syrian government, and resuming front-line battles with government forces without support of any foreign entity or state.

Vocal and [direct criticism](#) of Erdogan and Çavuşoğlu were also reported in a demonstration in Idleb, organized by Hizb al Tahrir, an Islamist party which calls for toppling Assad and establishing an Islamic Caliphate. Yet, confrontational statements and activities against Turkey have not gained momentum and have been subject to criticism by both civil and military entities in northwest Syria, as they have the potential to destabilize the Turkish sponsorship of the SNA, as well as increase anti-Syrian sentiments in the Turkish domestic landscape.

Nevertheless, the local reaction towards Turkish statements, and the escalation of protests expressing domestic grievances related to governance and security show that local support for Turkey's strategy is not certain. For instance, the inefficiency characterizing the SIG's institutions is arguably linked with Turkey's decision to refrain from establishing alternative governance structures in northwest Syria, as part of an [agreement](#) with Russia during the Astana Process. Instead, governance has been decentralized across local councils which are overly dependent on direct communication from Turkish officials in the border provinces, which consequently undermined their legitimacy in the public eye. Furthermore, discontent with Turkey's service provision and the SIG's inefficiency has been evident on various occasions, among which the [protests](#) against Al Bab's local council in January 2022 and the [burning](#) of Afrin's Akenerji office in June are telling examples. The [high rates of failure](#) among secondary education students in the recent official exams, and the persistence of [arbitrary arrests](#) by armed factions and police forces have further fueled anti-Turkish sentiments. The potential remains that tensions will take place over the nature and future of the relationship with Turkey, as well as the Syrian government, particularly if the two states decide to engage in a serious political dialogue.

Turkish shells hit SDF and government forces

Despite the perceived shift in hostilities between Ankara and Damascus, on the ground, Turkey continued its threats of a military operation in northern Syria. Shelling between Turkey, the Syrian gov-



Shelling hit a public market in Al Bab, killing and injuring over forty civilians. (Source: [Civil Defense Facebook](#))

ernment and SDF has continued; shelling during August was more intense and accurate, targeting a public market in Al Bab city, and government and SDF military locations in Ain al-Arab (Kobani) and northern Aleppo city in addition to opposition areas in Idleb, causing civilian and military casualties on all sides.

The shelling can be seen as fallout from the rumored potential reconciliation between Turkey and the Syrian government; despite friendlier political relations, the difficulty of agreeing on tangible solutions on the ground within the context of a fragile multi-party conflict are unlikely to be resolved in the short to medium term.

Casualties of August shelling

During August, at least two Turkish soldiers were [killed](#) and nine injured as a result of the bombing of Turkish military posts in northern Aleppo and southern Şanlıurfa state on the Turskindh border. Later, the Turkish authorities asked the citizens of Karkamiş to stay at home as the Turkish army would be responding. The Turkish forces attacked the source of the bombing, in SDF and Syrian government bases in Aleppo countryside and Ain al-Arab (Kobani) with artillery and air strikes.

The Syrian government's [Ministry of Defense](#) announced the death of three soldiers and injury of six others, while a Kurdish media source [reported](#) that sixteen government soldiers and one child were killed, and four civilians were wounded. A public market in Al Bab city was targeted by a wave of missile [shelling](#) mostly launched from areas controlled by the government forces and SDF, resulting in the death of 15 civilians, and the injury of more than 30 people. Moreover, Russian [warplanes](#) targeted the western outskirts of Idleb city with air strikes many times throughout the month, and Syrian government forces targeted several areas in the southern countryside of Idleb, near IDP camps, with no casualties recorded.

The number of civilian casualties in August exceeded those in July: Save the Children [announced](#) that 13 children have been killed and 27 others have been injured since the beginning of August. According to the Response Coordination Group, more than 700,000 civilians in and around Idleb are threatened with displacement because of the air strikes targeting the city's surroundings.

The continued attacks impose a state of instability in the region and prevent the return of thousands of IDPs to Jabal al-Zawiya, the eastern Idleb countryside, the al-Ghab Plain and areas in the western countryside of Aleppo. It also prevents the farmers from harvesting their crops and working on their farms.

Turkish shelling at odds with reported political developments

The continued military escalation indicates that it is still early to see a positive impact of any improved political relations between Ankara and Damascus. Continued military actions on both side shows neither are willing to give up positions while there remains no political guarantees for a deescalation or rapprochement, or any signs of agreement.

Military escalation in northwest Syria comes following a tripartite summit between Iran, Russia and Turkey in Tehran on 18 July. Turkey had tried

to get support from Iran and Russia for its potential military operation in northern Syria, but [differences](#) in response to this were clear: both Iran and Russia expressed concerns over further destabilizing the area, while Russia warned of the potential consequences to Turkey. It was clear that these differences were still valid even after the new Turkish political tone toward the Syrian government.

Preconditions for normalization between the Syrian government and Turkey

An unconfirmed list of mutual Turkish–Syrian [demands](#) and conditions for reconciliation between the governments were published by a Turkish media source. The most important is the Syrian government’s demand for Turkish support regarding the normalization of its relations with countries and international institutions and facing the US and European sanctions imposed on it. In addition, the Syrian government demanded that Turkey hand over the border crossings between Idleb and Turkey and to cede control of parts of the M4 highway. Turkey has demanded that the Syrian government eliminate the PKK in Syria and to proceed with the Geneva Convention (to establish a transitional governing body to oversee transition to peace), in addition to ensuring that Turkey monitors the implementation of a plan to return Syrian refugees from Turkey.

Despite neither Turkey nor the Syrian government confirming this, they do represent the major areas of contention between the parties, and are unlikely to be resolved in the short to medium term; it is possible, though speculative, that the Turkish statements may be a response to Russian pressure on Ankara to achieve reconciliation with Damascus.

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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.

