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Overview

22 Dec - 24 January

The closure of Semalka border crossing by Kurdistan Regional Government officials blocks aid, interrupts supply chains and causes shortages of basic commodities in the northeast.

1-20 January

Over 60 graduate doctors are recruited to work in hospitals throughout southern Syria, amid an exodus of healthcare professionals out of the country to higher paying positions abroad.

11 January

UN extends use of Bab-al Hawa border crossing for humanitarian aid deliveries until June 2022.

12 January

Syrian government attempts reconciliations in Ar-Raqqa, which are met with anger by tribal leaders.

14 January

Syrian government takes control of sales of bottled water, reinstating a monopoly and signaling further control of basic goods and services.

19 January

Heavy snowfall hits northern Aleppo and Idlib's displaced communities.

20 January

An attempted escape by ISIS prisoners leads to violence, military crackdown and insecurity throughout Al-Hasakeh, the worst caused by ISIS since its defeat in 2019.

Ongoing

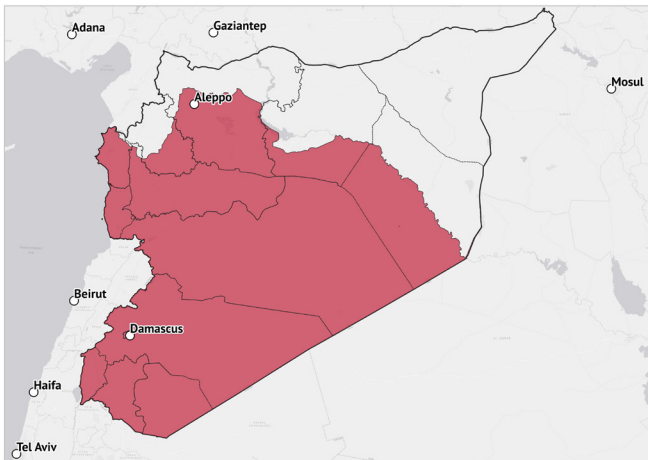
Government and Russian forces continue to bombard civilians and infrastructure in opposition-held territory, northern Syria.



An escape attempt by prisoners accused of ISIS affiliation has led to riots and a large-scale security crackdown by the Syrian Democratic Forces in Al-Hasakeh. The violence is the worst caused by ISIS since its defeat in 2019, and has displaced many thousands of residents from the city.

Image source: [Military Times](#)

South & central



Syrian government reinstates monopoly over water bottle sales

The Syrian government has reinstated its monopoly over the sale of bottled water. The Minister of Industry [directed](#) the General Corporation for Food Industries on 14 January to instruct Tartous General Corporation for Water to give 70% of its bottled water to the Syria Trade Establishment (STE) and the remaining 30% to the Military Social Establishment. The Minister's directive effectively ended old distribution quotas which previously saw 70% of bottled water enter the market through designated distributors.

Moreover, the minister's directive was preceded by a halt in water bottle production as a result of a lack of storage and distribution infrastructure. The General Corporation for Water Bottling of Al-San spring [told](#) pro-government media that it had stopped production 20 days before the directive was issued due to warehouses filling up with bottled water. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection also reminded

citizens that they could receive their water rations through the smart card at STE shops and sale points.

The STE's General Manager, Ziad Haza, [told](#) the state-run SANA News Agency that the objective of selling smart card water is to provide the rations to those who wish to purchase them directly, as an essential item, adding that the establishment has large amounts of water packs to fulfil citizen's demand.

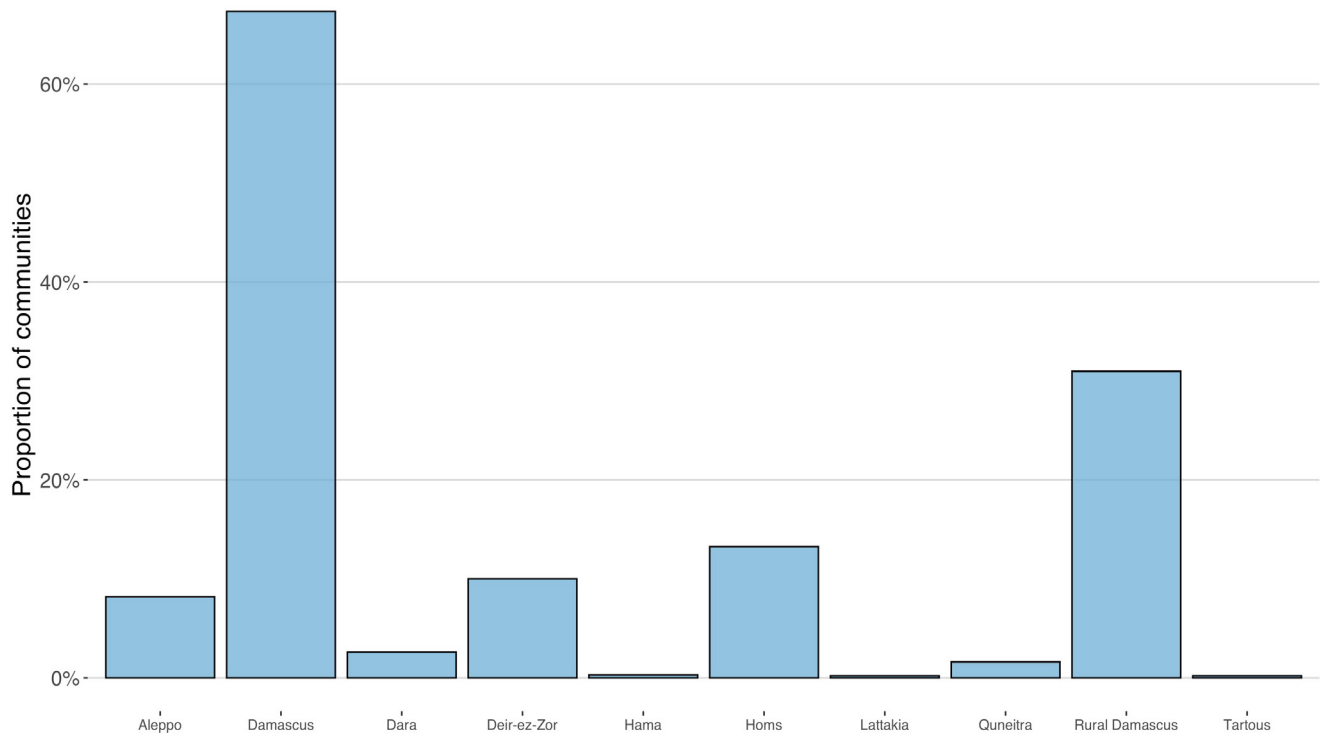
Low demand contributes to excessive supply

The excess water bottle supply hinted at by both the STE and the General Corporation for Water Bottling is likely affected by low demand for two reasons. First, demand for water bottles usually declines in the winter months due to the absence of the scorching heat, alleviating pressure off water bottle factories.

Second, the exorbitant prices of water bottles and the insufficiency of water rations, and the limited reach of the STE has pushed citizens to find other water sources with questionable potability, such as tap water and water from water trucks. Indeed, HNAP data shows that Damascus and Rural Damascus communities have the highest usage for bottled water at 67% and 33% respectively (shown below).

Recent monopolization imposed under different circumstances

Noting the reduced demand, the government's recent monopolization over water bottle sales comes at different circumstances where both demand and prices are low. The government had first [imposed](#) its monopoly on 8 August 2021 during the summer months at a time when demand was high, with local sources



Number of communities that reported bottled water use (Source: HNAP)

reporting that water bottles were largely unavailable at both the market and STE. This paved the way for a thriving black market which sold water bottles at exorbitant prices – local sources reported a 313% increase in the water bottle black market price. However, the monopoly was short-lived, and revoked by the Ministry of Industry – the event however served as a warning to distributors and traders on the possibility of state intervention.

Government control over essential items

Reasons for the current monopolization of the industry are unclear. It is possible that it falls into a general trend of government monopolization for the import and distribution of essential items. For example, sunflower oil, an item also subsidized and sold through the smart card, is imported by just [two](#) pro-government [businessmen](#), Samer Foz and Assem Anboa. The monopoly,

which the government vehemently [denied](#), was reportedly revealed following a [shortage](#) in supply and a 155% increase in prices from 4,300 SYP to 11,000 SYP per liter.

Sugar is another item that has been increasingly monopolized. Following years of public sector withdrawal from sugar production and [crackdowns](#) on sugar traders, a company owned by Foz, the MENA Crystal Sugar Company Ltd, received a government contract to provide 1,000 tonnes of sugar per day to the STE. Prior to being awarded the contract, prices had [increased](#) by more than 66%.

Residents faced with supply problems

The government monopoly over water bottles has resulted in supply issues. Local sources reported on 27 January that water bottle availability in Rural Damascus has decreased following its announcement. Moreover, the

price of six-pack 1.5L water bottles in the governorate has increased from 5,000 SYP to 8,000 SYP after its reinstatement, an indication of the reduced market supply. Additionally, local sources reported water distributor warnings that supply issues would increase once existing stock had been sold. It is possible that the government is facing logistical issues denying them the ability to properly distribute bottled water. Local sources reported that there aren't enough STE shops or points of sale to cover the areas required – they also usually close at 15:00, excluding post-work trade.

Monopolization likely to continue

Monopolization seems to be the government's go-to solution for price control, considering the government chose to monopolize oil, sugar, and water following a significant increase in their prices. Moreover, government officials themselves have hinted their support for monopolization.

The Syrian Domestic Trade minister, Amro Salem, [criticized](#) calls to allow the private sector free reign over imports, saying that: "Opening the door for imports won't make the price of potatoes less than 700 SYP and sunflower less than 3,000 – 4,000 SYP."

It is likely that we will continue to see increased monopolization of essential items, as in sunflower oil, sugar and water, sold through the smart card and items which the government is looking to add to it.

Syrian health officials call for salary increase

Syrian health officials have [called](#) for a 100% increase in doctor salaries in Syria to stop the "bleeding" in their ranks. Head of the Nursing,

Medical, Health Professions Syndicate in Aleppo, Khalife Kasara, [told](#) pro-government media that 60 new graduates from medical school had joined between 1 and 20 January of this year. Kasara added that all the new members requested a "proof of good behavior" document needed for work outside of Syria, signaling their intention to leave. Arfan Jalouk, head of the Aleppo Private Hospitals Association, [told](#) pro-government media that Syrian doctors and nurses are being recruited abroad for much higher salaries (shown below) compared to the 100,000 SYP (\$28) salary which they make on average per month in Syria.

Profession	Salary (USD per month)
Nurse	600 – 1000
Surgical nurse / specialized nurse	800 – 1500
Doctors	2000 – 3000
Surgeons	10000 – 30000

Average Syrian expat doctor's salary (Source: [Al-Watan Newspaper](#))

Syrian healthcare institutions suffer from brain drain

Jalouk stated that Syrian doctors have left to work in various countries. For example, Iraqi medical institutions in Basra, Baghdad, and Nasiriyah have recruited approximately 1000 Syrian doctors including radiologists, anaesthesiologists, and intensive care assistants along with laboratory technicians, reproductive endocrinologists, and surgical nurses. Jalouk added that the efflux of doctors abroad, particularly to Iraq and Libya which

recognize the Syrian degrees, have led to a significant reduction in the country's technical health specialists.

Anaesthesiologists scarce in government areas

One particular problem is the severe shortage in anaesthesiologists, with four reportedly [emigrating](#) every month. Government hospitals have recently found it difficult to operate in their absence. On 11 January, Fawaz Hilal, member of the Association of Specialists in Anaesthesia and Pain Management, stated that al-Zahrawi and the University Obstetrics Hospital in Damascus city does not have any anaesthesiologists on-call. This meant the hospital stopped accepting patients, resulting in empty waiting rooms and hallways. The hospital's general manager, Marwan al-Zayat, [attributed](#) this to the unavailability of anaesthesiologists, adding that if the hospital continued to accept patients with their absence, fatal mistakes could have been made.

Hilal [added](#) that the shortage has reached "important hospitals" in the capital and is no longer limited to those located in the periphery. Indeed, the shortage has become severe to the extent that no anaesthesiologists can be found in entire governorates such as Ar-Raqqa and Idleb with their presence in remaining governorates becoming sparse.

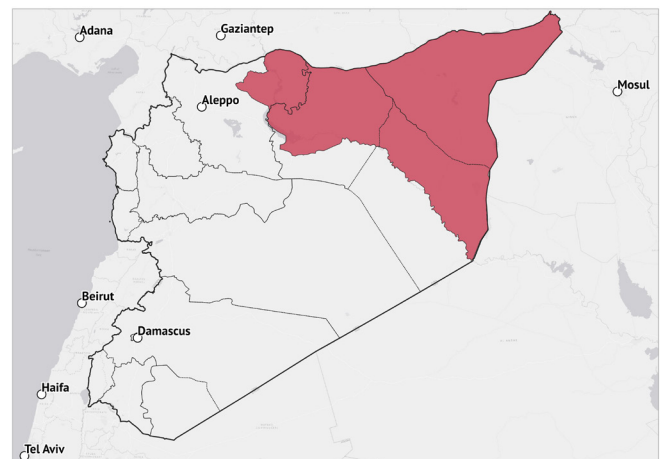
Doctors specialize in plastic surgery, shortage of life-saving specialists

In addition to the brain drain, the recent preference for doctors to choose a specialization in plastic surgery has also led to a reduction in doctors with essential specializations. Ghassan Fandi, vice president of the Doctor's Syndicate, [stated](#) that doctors have largely chosen to pursue plastic surgery

in the last two years at the expense of essential specializations such as neurosurgery, thoracic surgery, and anaesthesiology. Indeed, Fandi [told](#) pro-government media on 30 December 2021 that the number of plastic surgeons was now double that of those with essential specializations.

The brain drain, accompanied with the low number of new doctors entering essential specializations, has made the availability of doctors scarce in government areas. If the Syrian government continues to ignore this issue, it is likely that Syria's doctors will continue to leave the country and choose profitable specializations over life-saving ones.

Northeast



ISIS launches escape from Al-Sinaa prison

On 20 January, ISIS conducted an attack on the Al-Sinaa (or Ghweiran) prison in Al-Hasakeh city. ISIS cells reportedly detonated two car bombs, one near a Sadcop, the government's fuel company, fuel depot and another near the prison entrance. Inside

the prison, prisoners imprisoned for being ISIS members started a prison riot, burning blankets and plastic items, and attacking security guards.

The SDF [announced](#) it was dealing with an attempted ISIS prison escape in Al-Sinaa prison, following attacks by ISIS members who had “infiltrated the area from nearby neighborhoods.” Earlier in the day, prior to the car bomb explosions and prison riots, the SDF had cordoned off the Security Square in Al-Hasakeh city at around 11:00 and re-opened it at around 16:00.

SDF, International Coalition fight to restore order

As armed clashes broke out, the SDF closed down the Ghweiran neighborhood, limiting civilian movement, while the International Coalition provided aerial support. The SDF issued a second [statement](#) indicating that some ISIS members who attacked the prison had retreated into Zouhour neighborhood and hid in civilian homes. Clashes continued all night, and a wave of displacement from Ghweiran and Zouhour neighborhoods was recorded.

On 21 January, the SDF began imposing curfews across the district in areas where ISIS support is thought to be high, including Al-Hasakeh city, Shaddadi, and Markada. The SDF also reportedly deployed reinforcements to the nearby Shaddadi prison in fears of further escape attempts. Clashes continued for several days, however by 23 January, the SDF [announced](#) that it had regained full control of Al-Sinaa prison following violent counterattacks which had killed 175 suspected ISIS members. The SDF also accused ISIS of using up to 700 children who were being

held inside the prisons as ‘human shields,’ and called on the international community to intervene.

UNICEF later issued a [statement](#) on this, clarifying that 850 children were being held in detention across the northeast, the majority of whom were in Al-Sinaa prison, with concerns that they were being forced to take “an active role in the ongoing clashes.”

On 24 January, sources indicated that there were attempts at mediation with ISIS prisoners inside Al-Sinaa, with a subsequent partial surrender of around 300 ISIS members. Meanwhile, the SDF continued search and arrest operations in the city, while the Autonomous Administration imposed a partial curfew on Quamishli from 25-31 January and a full lockdown in Al-Hasakeh from 24-31 January. The road from Al-Hasakeh to Ar-Raqqa remained closed, with [media reports](#) of civilians stuck along the highway.

Fighting continued on 25 January, with local reports indicating that 11 hostages were freed from the prison. Search and arrest operations also continued in Zouhour and Ghweiran neighborhoods, as another batch of ISIS fighters – estimated at 250 individuals – surrendered.

Thousands displaced in fallout

Internal displacement was also recorded due to the fighting. There have been reports on a several thousand people being displaced, however due to lack of access, numbers could not be verified. IDP arrivals were recorded at five different locations in the Syrian government-held security square (including

schools, and in temporary accommodation), and other locations in Administration-held neighborhoods across Al-Hasakeh city such as Tal Hajar and Al-Talaa. As of 31 January, a small number of returnees has been recorded in Zouhour and Ghweiran neighborhoods, with the number of returnees likely to increase in the coming days due to the ending of the lockdown on 1 February.

HAT is currently working on a report that would further detail the implications of the events in Al-Sinaa prison.

Crossing closure causes shortages in northeast



Semalka border crossing, northeast Syria, was closed throughout January, causing a build-up of humanitarian aid deliveries and disruption to supply chains

There have been considerable shortages of basic food and other commodities following the closure of two primary border crossings between the Autonomous Administration-held northeast, and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The closures came as a result of clashes between the youth wing of the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and blocked not only commercial transport, but civilian, and more

concerning, humanitarian aid deliveries and staff. The border remained closed until [6 January](#), when residents, wheat and aid convoys were allowed back through (for one day) before it was closed again until 25 January – the humanitarian impact of the delays remains unreported.

Supply chains for commercial goods also came to a halt. An example of this is the shortages of sugar, which led to protests by residents in the northeast, unhappy with the lack of provision and increases in price of basic goods. The Administration imports sugar through Semalka via a company called Newroz, which has a monopoly on sugar imports into the northeast. When the borders closed, the sugar supply was cut off, leading to demonstrations by residents, and the sale of sugar on the black market.

In Menbij for example, local sources reported sugar was being sold at 5,000 SYP per kg (the Administration has recently raised prices to 2,850 SYP per kg, still significantly lower than the black market price). Protests broke out on 16 and 17 January, in the Salhiyeh neighborhood of Al-Hasakeh city. Citizens protested in front of the Newroz customer hall (where the sugar is stored), with protestors even attempting to break in.

In addition, wheat shortages have further exacerbated the protests. The wheat crisis is a pre-existing issue in the northeast with wheat shortages being recorded over the past few months due to a poor production season, and corruption, among other reasons.

The Administration's co-chair of the Economic Commission, Amal Khuzaim, stated that the Administration has resorted to mixing 20% of yellow corn with wheat in order to compensate

for the wheat shortages. This, however, led to bad quality bread that expired quickly. According to Khuzaim, Administration-held areas require 700,000 tonnes of wheat, however only 180,000 tonnes were available, and reserves only amounted to 200,000 tonnes.

Meanwhile, the Administration [reportedly](#) signed a wheat deal with Russia on 6 January to import 100,000 tonnes of wheat as a first step to resolve the crisis. The deal reportedly took place after a number of meetings were held in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh between Kurdish officials and Russian representatives.

Menbij is also currently suffering from a fuel shortage. Local sources report that as of 28 January, only two gas stations in eastern rural Menbij are providing gas and fuel. Prices have also increased due to shortages, where one gas cylinder for example now costs 55,000 SYP (after having been between 25,000 SYP - 30,000 SYP a month and a half ago).

Locals demonstrate against poor provision of basic goods, services

On 9 January, residents of Sweidieh, western Ar-Raqqa, demonstrated against the lack of basic services and food supply in their town. Residents also protested against the bad quality of bread being sold in bakeries. Demonstrations turned violent, as media sources reported that the SDF shot live bullets at protestors to try and disperse them. Local sources reported that around 50 civilians were arrested. Sweidieh is an Arab-tribal majority town, and so the likelihood that the SDF's response mechanism increased tensions is highly likely. Residents across the northeast, including Amuda, Al-Hasakeh, Quamishli, Tel

Abiad, and Ar-Raqqa, have also complained about similar issues, including the bad quality of bread.

Semalka reopens in late January

On 25 January, local sources reported on the reopening of the Semalka border crossing as goods reportedly entered the northeast. As of 29 January, Semalka has reopened for the civilian movement.

At the same time, shortages continue in many parts of the northeast. On 26 January, co-chair of the Economic Committee, Rashad Kardo, stated that sugar should be arriving to Ar-Raqqa within 10 days, with the reopening of the crossings and roads following snow. The status of wheat or fuel deliveries remain unknown.

Government reconciliations anger tribes in eastern Ar-Raqqa

On 12 January, the Syrian government began a reconciliation agreement process in Sabkha, eastern Ar-Raqqa. The event marked the first time such an agreement was conducted in Ar-Raqqa governorate.

Residents of Ar-Raqqa have been staunchly against the reconciliation agreements. On 17 January, influential tribal figures from Ar-Raqqa governorate met in Tabqa to express their rejection of the settlement process. The meeting was held in coordination with the Office of Military Relations of the SDF.

During the meeting, tribal figures reinstated their anti-government sentiments, saying that those who reconcile would be "dishonoring the blood of thousands of martyrs who sacrificed their lives to liberate these areas

from the terrorism of ISIS, before which the regime had withdrawn to hand over our cities and villages”.

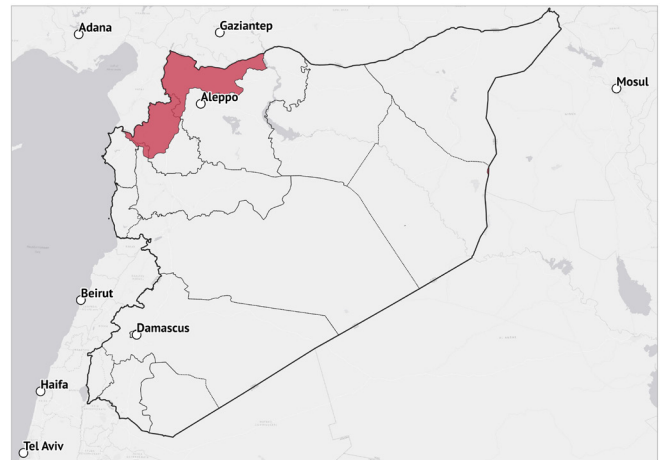
The tribes present in the meeting were pro-Autonomous Administration. Sheikh Mehdi Al-Saleh, head of the Hawayrat tribe, demanded the prosecution of those who were conducting reconciliations with the government, while Sheikh Hussein Al-Barghout, who fled Al-Bukamal with his clan, stated that he refuses to return to the town due to the presence of the Syrian government. Further, on 19 January, anti-reconciliation demonstrations broke out in Al-Shammas square, Ar-Raqqa city. Protestors rejected the agreement, expressing their distrust of the Syrian government.

Reconciliations lead to arrests

So far, an unconfirmed number of individuals have been arrested while attempting reconciliation in Sabkha, but in general, the number of individuals attempting to reconcile remains very low, especially when compared with the numbers of reconciliation agreements in western Deir-ez-Zor (which are also low).

As such, in attempting these reconciliation agreements, it seems that the Syrian government is trying to gain political momentum at the expense of the Autonomous Administration in the northeast. This comes amid a number of key events in the region, such as the possibility of continued talk between Damascus and the northeast Administration.

Northwest



Government, Russian attacks signal bloody start to the year in the northwest

The increase of military offensives continued in northwest Syria at the end of December and the beginning of January. Government and Russian forces bombarded areas near the border west of Idleb, Jabal al-Zawiya south of Idleb, and several locations west of Aleppo with artillery, missile and aerial fire which targeted vital civilian and economic property and infrastructure.

Among the targeted areas were a number of livestock farms, as well as the main UNICEF-supported Arshani water station supplying water to the city of Idleb. Additionally, the attacks killed and wounded a number of civilians, including children.

International reaction

On 4 January, the US, France and UNICEF condemned the escalation of violence in Idleb. As a result of the bombing of the water station, water supplies were cut off for more than

241,000 people, many of whom are displaced. According to Muhammad Jamal Diban, director general of the water department, the Idleb city water officials, in cooperation with humanitarian organizations, have worked to pump water through alternative internal stations temporarily, until they fix the damaged mechanical and electrical equipment at the Arshani station.

Factors behind the escalation

The continuation of the military escalation is linked to Russian dissatisfaction with the slowdown of action agreed to between Russia and Turkey in the 5 March ceasefire agreement, signed in 2020. In statements by Alexander Lavrentiev, Russian presidential envoy to Syria, he expressed dissatisfaction with progress in removing militants from the area (one of the clauses of the ceasefire was that Turkey would be responsible for removing terrorists and terrorist groups from the northwest), and has [offered Turkey military aid](#) to help it achieve its goals.

It is expected that northwest Syria will see a rise in the intensity of military attacks in the coming months, with the area serving as an arena for the exchange of warnings of potential action by the Syrian government, its Russian allies, the Turkish forces in the area, and the Autonomous Administration in the northeast. At the same time, it is not expected that there will necessarily be any change in the map of control or influence.

UN extends use of Bab al-Hawa crossing for further six months

This most recent escalation in violence comes at the same time that the UN extended the use of Bab al-Hawa border crossing for aid

deliveries, without a Security Council vote on the issue. The UN decision treated the renewal for an extension of the use of the crossing by UN aid agencies and their partners for a further six months as de facto, while the Security Council will vote again in July 2022 for any further extensions, according to UNSCR 2585.

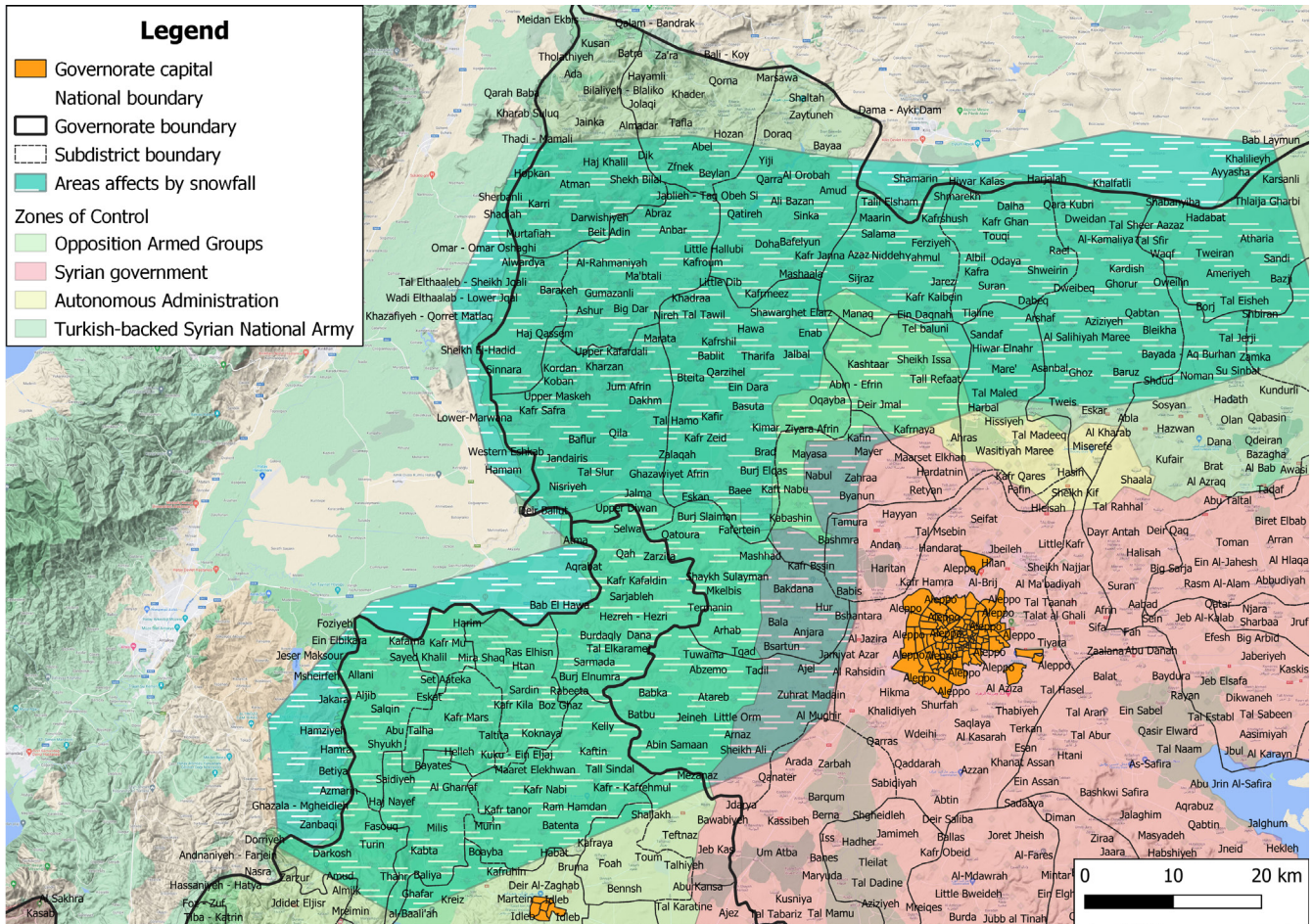
Russia, who threatened to call a vote, made a last minute decision not to – according to [Middle Eastern analysts](#), this was in exchange for a softening of rules against NGOs working on early recovery projects, and restrictions against aid to Damascus (although this remains unconfirmed).

Snowstorms hit vulnerable and displaced in northwest



IDP shelters during a winter snowstorm. Storms have devastated IDP camps throughout the northwest

On 24 January, the Response coordination Group (RCG) announced that more than 90% of the camps in northern Syria had been damaged as a result of harsh winter storms. Snowstorms have affected most areas of Syria, and other countries in the Middle East throughout January. IDPs, particularly those living in camps in northern Aleppo



Areas of heavy snowfall, northwest Syria

and northern and western Idleb, have been severely affected, and many sick or injured people have been unable to be transferred to hospitals for treatment, with no escape from their temporary shelters. Aid deliveries have also been interrupted, due to road closures.

Snowfall was concentrated largely in the mountainous areas north of Aleppo, around Afrin and its countryside, and north and west of Idleb. Camps which were damaged due to heavy rainfall were located in the agricultural lowlands, including areas north of Idleb, and the Roj plain, west of Idleb. As of 1 February, RCG documented damage to 311 camps, while more than 33,716 people were affected by the storms, and 2,753 people were made homeless because their tents were destroyed.

Since the beginning of the snowfall, many organizations have issued distress calls to secure the necessary support to meet the needs of those affected, and to provide heating or places to shelter the displaced coming from the affected camps.

In turn, many factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army in northern Aleppo announced their readiness to help families affected by the snowfall, and to secure temporary shelters to receive the displaced from the camps. The opposition-appointed Grand Mufti of Syria, Sheikh Osama al-Rifai, also called for relief of Syrian refugees in refugee camps in Lebanon and northern Syria, and various other camps.

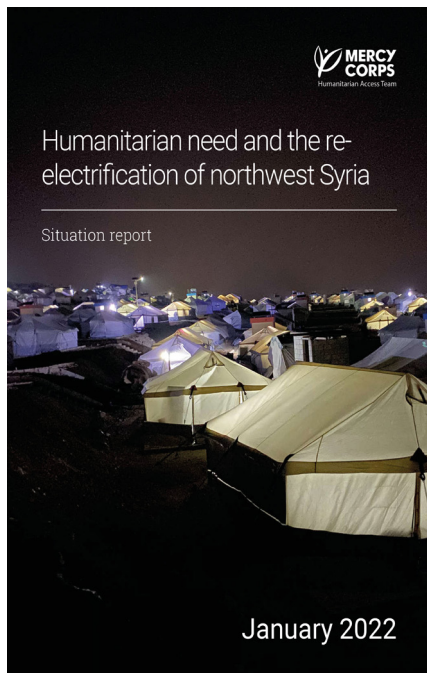
Insufficient humanitarian response

Despite these initiatives, the humanitarian response was limited, and failed to significantly protect many of the camps. The UN Deputy Regional Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs in Syria, Mark Cutts, [said](#) that the UN has received only 45% of its \$4.5 billion appeal for funding, down further from 58% in 2021.

Repeated suffering

Stability for the IDPs within the camps is impossible without a final solution for the transfer of civilians to safe places. The suffering of the IDPs in the camps is repeated every winter, in the absence of a clear coordination of humanitarian response operations in the region and the absence of actual and well-studied plans for the needs of the region, especially in light of the continuous lack of support necessary to achieve these plans.

January publications...



Humanitarian need and the re-electricification of northwest Syria.

In May 2021, households and businesses in Idleb governorate gained access to a reliable electricity source for the first time in six years. Utilizing night lights reflectance data, HAT has mapped out geographical changes in energy consumption. Consequently, while increased electricity access may be a hugely positive for the local population in Idleb, the humanitarian benefits are yet to be seen.

CONTACT

Nicholas Bodanac

Humanitarian Access Team

nbodanac@mercycorps.org

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.

