

Syria Monthly Report



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Overview

6 July

Issam Charafeddine, Lebanon's caretaker minister of the displaced, announces plans to repatriate up to 15,000 Syrian refugees from Lebanon per month. Discussions on the situation of refugees in Lebanon are growing amid the worsening economy of the country. Syrian refugees are concerned about the poor circumstances they would be returning to in Syria.

12 July

President Bashar al-Assad and First Lady Asma al-Assad visit Aleppo for the first time since the start of the conflict in 2011. Visits of this kind usually come following military victory, however in this instance it appears to signify a renewed interest in the economic and agricultural potential of the area.

12 July

The UN Security Council agrees to extend cross-border aid into Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey. Millions of Syrians in northwest Syria rely on this aid, while cross-line aid from government-held areas remains insufficient for their needs.

13 July

The US reiterates its support for the SDF in its continued fight against ISIS, calling for stability in the region, particularly in relation to a Turkish incursion.

15 July

Government forces deploy throughout Jasim, following an alleged ISIS-authorized assassination. Questions were raised over the true justification of the increased military activity, both

of ISIS' claims of responsibility and the governments motives, which could also be to reinforce its status.

20 July

Syrian Democratic Forces launch their annual conscription campaigning in northeast Syria, causing localized protests against the compulsory policy, and subsequent detention and arrest of military-aged males throughout the region.

23 July

Ukrainian and Russian delegates sign an agreement in Istanbul, hosted by the UN Secretary General and Turkish president, facilitating the export of wheat from besieged Ukrainian areas through 'safe corridors' in the Black Sea. Potential repercussions across all zones of control in Syria vary.



The UN Security Council adopted resolution 2642, allowing the continuation of cross-border aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Turkey and Syria. Despite tense negotiations between Russian and other representatives, the resolution has been adopted for six months, with an option of extension for a further six months until July 2023 to be decided in January.

Summary

In Syrian government-held areas, the July 2022 HAT Monthly report investigates two separate developments indicating that the security architecture in southern Syria continues to fracture. In the areas surrounding Jasim, including the city itself, increased claims of ISIS attacks have led government forces to focus attention on countering local armed groups; whether this is indeed the proliferation of ISIS, or rather a component of cracking down on previously reconciled armed groups, is up for debate. To the east, in As-Sweida governorate, tensions between local stakeholders, including prominent Druze power brokers and their armed allies, reached a boiling point with a pro-government armed actor, Qouwat al-Fajr; in the end, Qouwat al-Fajr, including its leadership, were ultimately defeated. These developments lead to questions surrounding the makeup and future architecture for security in the region.

Separately, the HAT provides interpretations of the meaning behind Bashar al-Assad's first visit to Aleppo since the beginning of the conflict.

In early July, Lebanese politicians continued to echo their populist intentions of repatriating Syrian refugees, ascribing blame to the socio-economic crisis plaguing the country. The HAT explores the shortcomings of this idea, particularly from the obstacles that exist in the localities to which Syrian refugees would hypothetically be returning.

This month's report also provides a deep dive into developments related to wheat market dynamics in Syria, both in terms of domestic production and how global developments may (or may not) impact Syria based on areas of control, and associated actors, throughout the country.

In northeast Syria, an SDF conscription campaign was launched in late July, building upon localized – though geographically broad – tensions with local communities, the most notable culminating in a general strike in Menbij. Separately, an update to reflect the lack of allied support for a Turkish offensive in northern Syria is provided, demonstrating that while markets have been affected by 'emergency' decrees, movement and displacement in anticipation of an offensive have largely come to a halt.

Finally, a forward-looking perspective on the UN Security Council's renewal of the cross-border resolution, in particular its shortcomings, highlights the challenges related to a failure to renew in January 2023.

Cover photo: Baalbek, Lebanon. Informal tent settlements like this one have become home for many refugees from Syria. (Source: Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps).

Economic indicators

	May 2022	June 2022	July 2022
SYP/USD official exchange rate	2,500	2,800	2,800
SYP/USD parallel market rate	3,962.7 (1.3%)	3,990.7 (0.7%)	4,034.9 (1.1%)
TRY/USD official rate	15.70 (6.2%)	16.90 (7.4%)	17.4 (2.5%)

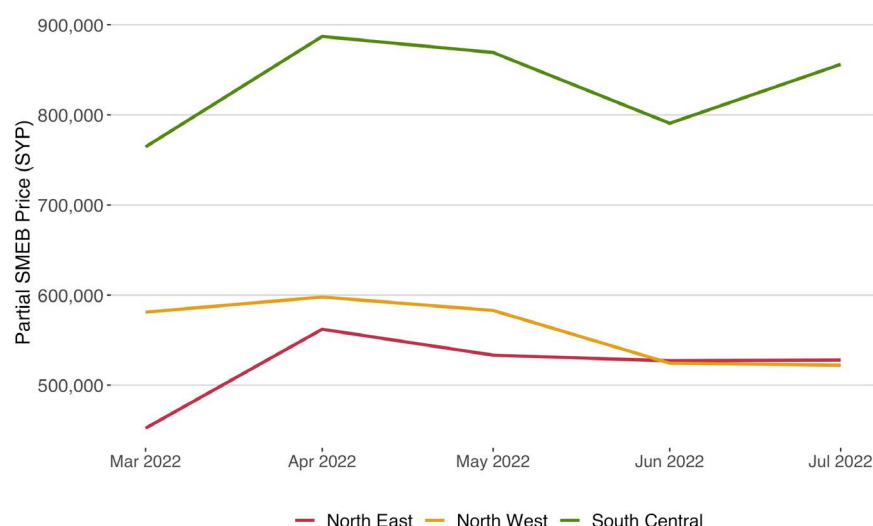
Economic indicator 1.

Official and parallel market exchange rates, SYP/USD and TRY/USD, May–July 2022



Economic indicator 2.

SYP/USD and TRY/USD, Jan 2020–July 2022



Economic indicator 3.

Change in partial SMEB price by zone of control, Mar–June 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

Lebanese politicians discuss Syrian refugee repatriation

Following his visit to Damascus in April, on 6 July Issam Charafeddine, Lebanon's caretaker minister of the displaced, announced plans to repatriate up to 15,000 Syrian refugees from Lebanon per month. Charafeddine stated that this plan comes following the Syrian government's alleged efforts to encourage returns through several means, including the recently passed amnesty program, delaying conscription, replacement of lost official documents, and registration of newborns. The repatriation program comes as the Lebanese government continues to highlight the presumed stress of the presence of Syrian refugees and displaced individuals on the Lebanese economy. Charafeddine [stated](#) that the repatriation program will commence "within months," as plans for a meeting between him and Syria's local administration and environment minister were in place, to discuss the Syrian government's proposal to host repatriated refugees in "temporary housing."

Commenting on the repatriation plan, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister, Najib Mikati, [reiterated](#) his country's commitment to "comply with international laws and accords," despite [threatening](#) last May to "work to get (refugees) out legally by firmly applying Lebanese laws," in the case of Western countries and the international community failing to provide the necessary support to solve the refugee crisis. Mikati also stated that Lebanon currently hosts over 1.7 million displaced Syrian and Palestinian refugees, highlighting the country's economic crisis as a driving factor behind the repatriation plan.

It could be argued that this repatriation plan is one of the most specific put forward by an active member of the Lebanese government, despite the lack of clarity over its operationalization and im-

plementation. While Charafeddine reportedly did meet Syria's local administration and environment minister to discuss repatriations, including providing returnees with temporary housing, specific incentives and mechanisms for returns are yet to be announced by either the Lebanese or the Syrian government, and no further announcements were made after the meeting that was supposed to take place.

While some [Lebanese voices often argue](#) that Syria now constitutes an area of safe return for refugees in Lebanon, myriad difficulties involving protection, security, accessibility to legal documents, conscription, and poverty may prove otherwise. Further complicating this is that unaddressed issues that returnees may encounter in Syria are highly localized, often more granular than zones of control and associated actors in power.

Furthermore, humanitarian data has demonstrated that, upon returning, conditions were far worse than expected by former refugees, a common finding across all four zones of control throughout Syria. In terms of assistance, returnees are also disproportionately in higher need of humanitarian aid in comparison to their host communities. The lack of proper documentation among returning refugees may also act as an impediment to registration with humanitarian organizations, adding another hurdle to the concept of safe returns.

HAT will be producing a standalone report covering this topic in-depth later this month.

Ukraine wheat exports resume

In efforts to reduce the effects of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on food supplies, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, was [joined](#) by the UN Secretary General in Istanbul for a signing ceremony on 23 July, where Ukrainian and Russian delegates signed an agreement facilitating the export of wheat from besieged Ukrainian areas through 'safe corridors' in the Black Sea. The agreement, signed on 23 July, garnered assurances from both

sides in regards to the safety of cargo ships traveling in the region; at the time of reporting, the first cargo ship carrying wheat had passed inspections, as a part of the protocol within the agreement, en route to Lebanon.

The effects of this agreement on Syria, however, remain to be observed. Broadly speaking, the resumption of Ukrainian wheat export is likely to have a marginal and indirect – if not negligible – impact on Syria. Given the dependency on domestic cultivation and cross-line trade, as well as on Syria's neighbors, a positive impact of Ukraine resuming exports is likely indirect in nature, based on two primary factors: increased supply to Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon and decreased global prices as global wheat supply increases. Despite this, the benefit to Syria of a Ukraine–Russia–Turkey–UN agreement will likely be hamstrung by realities specific to each zone of control and associated controlling actors.

Northwest Syria

Media sources indicated that according to the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), the planted area of wheat in Idlib reached 74,845 dunums in 2022, which accounts for [less than a third](#) of the total

Governorate	Non-subsidized bread/kg
Idlib	11 TRY
Damascus	3,500 SYP
Rural Damascus	2,800-3,500 SYP
Dar'a	2,600 SYP
Sweida	3,500 SYP
Al-Hasakeh	1,500-2,700 SYP
Ar-Raqqa	1600-2,300 SYP
Deir ez-Zor (NES)	2000 SYP
Aleppo (Menbij)	3,000 SYP
Aleppo (A'zaz, Atareb, Afrin)	9-11 TRY

amount of wheat needed in the northern governorates. To encourage agricultural production, and specifically the cultivation of wheat, the SSG has increased its wheat purchase price from \$330 per tonne to \$430–450 per tonne, based on the type, quality and percentage of impurities. However, local sources are concerned that SSG policies aiming to support the agricultural sector have failed to address farmers' needs effectively. In northern Aleppo, the Grain Corporation,¹ affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG), continues to purchase wheat from farmers in its centers in Aleppo; as of 27 July, [13,952 tonnes](#) of hard and soft wheat were purchased and sent to the Corporation's mills to produce flour. The Syrian Interim Government increased the wheat procurement price from \$315 to \$460 per tonne for soft wheat and [\\$325 to \\$475 per tonne for hard wheat](#).

Governorate	Quantity delivered to government branches (tonnes)
Dar'a	>41,000 ¹
Al Hasakeh	>13,000 ²
Ar-Raqqa	>15,000 ³
As-Sweida	>1,700 ⁴
Aleppo	>167,000 ⁵
Hama	>131,000 ⁶
Homs	>47,237 ⁷
Deir-ez-Zor	>35,000 ⁸
Total	>448,621

1 <https://t.ly/QjFC>

2 <https://shorturl.at/BFMOZ>

3 <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1679107>

4 <https://shorturl.at/dJP04>

5 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/592153>

6 Ibid.

7 <https://t.ly/A5XN>

8 https://t.ly/_5HH

1 Also known as the General Company for Storage and Marketing of Grains and the General Organization for Grain

For northwest Syria, the increase in imports to Turkey is likely to have a direct effect as the region is largely dependent on Turkish procurement and supply of wheat. As the agreement is likely to have a positive impact on global wheat prices due to the increased supply of wheat on the market, Turkey will be in a position to provide northwest Syria with more affordable wheat; that said, Turkey has its own domestic economic concerns that it will likely prioritize. Given the high vulnerability to food insecurity in northwest Syria and the limited time in which humanitarian organizations can supply vital human needs, there is a pressing need to enhance cooperation between international and local organizations, build community resilience and reduce dependence on humanitarian aid.

South and central Syria

The head of the Syrian Grain Corporation, Abdel Latif al Amin, [stated](#) that an estimated total of 500,000 tonnes of wheat has been delivered by farmers since early June, compared to 336,000 tonnes in the previous year, adding that this is enough to supply local consumption for about three months. On 17 July, the plant production director at the Ministry of Agriculture [reported](#) a slightly higher figure of 551,044 tonnes, specifying that 493,817 tonnes were delivered to branches of the Syrian Grain Corporation and 57,227 tonnes were delivered to the branches of the General Organization for Seed Multiplication.

While these quantities represent an improvement on last year's, they [remain far](#) from estimates made by the Farmers' Union head, Ahmad Saleh al Ibrahim, who reported in late May that the volume of crops is expected to range between 1 and 1.2m tonnes. Consequently, importing wheat from outside Syria remains an inevitable necessity to avoid a further deterioration of food security levels.

The Syrian government's ability to seal a significant wheat import deal remains questionable due to its finances, [sanctions](#) on trade partners, and [measures](#) taken by international actors to restrict wheat

trade. It is unlikely Ukrainian wheat exporters will sell to Syrian importers, particularly as [Ukrainian sanctions and a trade embargo](#) have been discussed over Damascus' recognition of independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine; on 20 July, Syria and Ukraine formally [broke diplomatic ties](#). As an additional barrier, the Syrian government, and Syrian wheat importers, have incredibly limited access to US dollars or other foreign currency reserves that could have been used to procure wheat at scale.

While a decrease in prices may help ease pressure on foreign reserve holdings, it is unlikely that procurement of any import would be brought to scale. The resumption of Ukrainian wheat exports to Lebanon, however, could be means for Syrian importers to access wheat-based products; while unconfirmed, Lebanese politicians have claimed ongoing smuggling operations have taken place "[on a massive scale](#)" from Lebanon to Syria.

Northeast Syria

On 23 July, the Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria issued a [circular](#), according to which 30 July is the last day for merchants to deliver wheat to the centers affiliated with the Administration. The circular stated that the merchants who fail to meet the deadline will be subject to penalties in accordance with the Administration's laws and the wheat that they have stored will be confiscated and sold in the centers.

According to the head of Development of Agricultural Society Company, an [affiliate](#) of the Autonomous Administration and actor responsible for receiving crops from farmers and delivering agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, [379,000 tonnes](#) of wheat have been harvested in northeast Syria as of the third week of July, while 450,000 tonnes is expected; 150,000 tonnes less than is required to meet the needs of the population in the region.

After the announcement that the available wheat would not be sufficient to cover northeast Syria's annual wheat consumption, the Autonomous Administration issued another [circular](#) on 31 July, stating that farmers' will have an extra four days, until 4 August, to deliver wheat to its centers.

For northeast Syria, wheat exports outside Administration-held areas [have been banned](#) in efforts to curb its outflow. Wheat production in the northeast has been largely affected by recurring droughts among other factors (as recently discussed in HAT's July 2022 quantitative [report](#): 'Measuring agricultural production in northeast Syria'). While there is no official policy to import wheat to the northeast, there have been humanitarian [interventions](#) in efforts to alleviate food shortages, particularly bread and flour.

While increased global supply of wheat could, in theory, allow for the gap between consumption and domestic supply in northeast Syria to be filled, it is unlikely that major importation of wheat – be it from Turkey or Iraq – is likely to take place. As well understood, Turkey is adversarial towards the Administration and its affiliates, while importing via Iraq could prove problematic for local stakeholders (eg., competition with local farmers and traders).

Incentives and smuggling

The Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration have [presented](#) competing offers to farmers in northeast Syria to secure wheat harvests. The price the government will pay for wheat produced outside government-controlled areas has been set at [2,100 SYP](#) per kg (from 1,700 SYP, which includes 400 SYP for delivery of wheat to its centers in Al-Hasakeh).² Such incentives have also been combined with punitive measures by both govern-

ing bodies. For example, since early June, government forces have [arrested](#) several farmers in northern Deir-ez-Zor, because they had not delivered all their crops to its branches. For its part, punitive measures carried out by the Administration have varied; in some cases, subsidies were suspended to farmers, forcing them to sign a document agreeing to deliver their crops to the Administration's grain centers in return for receiving diesel allocations needed for irrigation.³ At the time of reporting, local sources indicated that the Autonomous Administration had begun an arrest campaign of farmers who it believed did not intend to provide their harvest as required by authorities in northeast Syria.

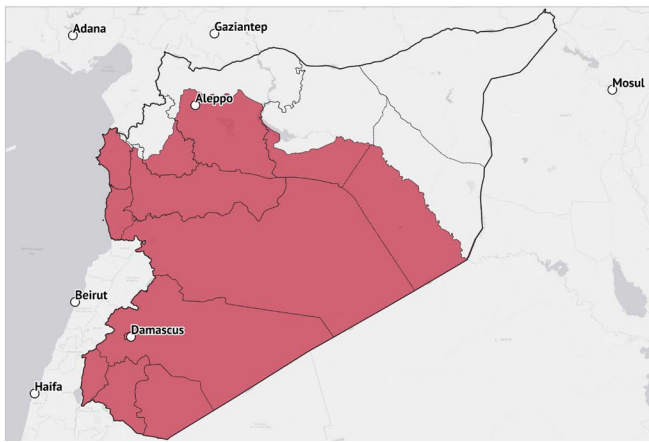
Price variations are likely to have incentivized both cross-line and potentially cross-border wheat smuggling; at the very least, accusations of facilitating illicit wheat trade have flourished. Both the SIG and the Autonomous Administration have formally announced policies to combat wheat smuggling.

On 3 July, the opposition-aligned Free Lawyers Association [issued allegations of wheat smuggling](#) from opposition-held northwest and northern Syria to both Administration- and government-held areas. Further, media sources have reported that [cross-border wheat smuggling operations](#) are taking place through Ar-Rai crossing from Peace Spring areas into Turkey under the supervision of leaders in Syrian National Army (SNA) factions. Mustafa Sejari, a commander in the Revolutionary Committee affiliated with SNA, [denied](#) wheat shipments into Turkey, which were recently presented as evidence of smuggling operations facilitated by the SNA on social media; he said they are in fact Ukrainian wheat shipments that originally were brought into Syria and were considered to be 'surplus' supply to be returned to Turkey.

² Media sources indicated that compensation to wheat producers set by the government following the Grains Conference on May 14 was set at 2,000 SYP per kilogram for crops cultivated in government-controlled (1,700 SYP per kilogram plus a bonus of 300 SYP for delivery to the branches of the Syrian Grain Corporation and the General Organization for Seed Multiplication).

³ Ibid.

South & central



Syrian government deploys around Jasim

Government forces are preparing for potential military action on Jasim, against the alleged presence of ISIS combatants in the city.

The head of the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) in Dar'a, Louay al-Ali, reportedly [threatened](#) to storm the city if the Dar'a Central Committee did not help the Syrian military capture the combatants. Media sources have stated that government forces were [observed](#) continuously monitoring the town's agricultural areas before instructing farmers to leave their lands. Government forces later deployed to the town's outskirts, fortifying their positions inside Jasim, and eventually closing the town's agricultural roads to the west on 15 July.

Deployment follows alleged ISIS-authorized assassination

The Jasim deployment was preceded by an increase in security incidents, rumored to be an indication of increased ISIS activity throughout the governorate. Kinan Talib Al-Eid, former opposition commander of the armed group Alwiyyat Qasiyoun, was reportedly killed in Jasim on 3 July after 15 gunmen stormed his house, shooting him more than 40 times. Local media [reported](#) that the attack was

by fighters belonging to ISIS cells located between the outskirts of west of Jasim, into Quneitra governorate. In a separate incident, ISIS also [claimed](#) responsibility for killing the Kherbet Ghazaleh township's police chief on 2 July after he was shot by unidentified assailants. In early June, local sources stated that young men claiming to be ISIS affiliates approached al-Omari mosque in Dar'a al-Balad demanding to preach their extremist rhetoric but were stopped by the Dar'a al-Balad Central committee. Additionally, the body of a Syrian Arab Army 7th Division soldier was [found](#) decapitated on 17 June in agricultural lands between Jasim and Namar.

Validity of ISIS claims questioned

Despite the increased attribution to ISIS, reasons to question an actual reemergence remain. ISIS has shown a tendency to [claim](#) attacks it did not carry out, but either inspired or as an attempt to reclaim relevance. Moreover, Central Committee members tend to [accuse](#) some leaders of former-opposition groups of ISIS affiliation, such as Tarek al-Subayhi or Iyad Jaara, particularly at times of tension.

While affiliation, in a practical sense, can be unclear, accusations can also be seen as attempts to discredit rival armed groups. Further, details surrounding some of these attacks indicate that the Syrian government could be masquerading as ISIS. For example, Kinan's assassination was noteworthy because of its modus operandi and brutality, which are uncommon, in addition to the timing of the attack following his visit to Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. His trip [coincided](#) with rumors of a coordinated anti-government collective being set up in southern Syria which is what local media believed was the purpose of his visit.

Government uses ISIS to justify military action

Perhaps most relevant to these developments is the Syrian government's habit of using ISIS as a [pretext](#) to discredit and extort local councils or to besiege and attack certain communities to further cement its control. Local communities seem to be

aware of this; on 15 July, a [demonstration](#) in front of al-Omari mosque in Dar'a al-Balad took place. The demonstration was in opposition to both Iran-backed militias and the propagation of rumors about increased ISIS presence in the governorate (see below).



Demonstrators near al-Omari mosque on 15 July. One sign says “Dar’a is void of ISIS.” (Source: [Enab Baladi](#))

The Syrian government suffered a humiliating defeat in Jasim in March, an incident that it is unlikely to forget: State Security forces attempted to arrest former-opposition commanders in Jasim, but failed due to a deadly [ambush](#) and unconditional [withdrawal](#). The incident prompted the government to [transfer](#) security responsibilities to the MID later in April, which took control of all checkpoints and positions inside the town, serving as an indication that the government is taking an increasingly aggressive posture. Indeed, the Syrian government tends to rely on the MID for its difficult tasks given its record, experience, influence, and unmatched resources and manpower compared to other government agencies.

Noting the government’s long institutional memory, it is unlikely local government-aligned stakeholders would allow an embarrassing incident – such as the March ambush – to remain unpunished.

Pro-government armed group dissolved in As-Sweida

Intense clashes between disgruntled local armed groups and the pro-government Qouwat al-Fajrr took place in As-Sweida governorate, resulting in the partial paralysis of daily life. Qouwat al-Fajrr was effectively dissolved on 27 July after local armed groups⁴ surrounded and attacked its headquarters the previous day. The attack resulted in prolonged clashes; the headquarters were taken over, fighters were killed or captured and the commander of the group, Raji Falhout, is reportedly missing.

The clashes resulted in a sudden influx of wounded people to Shahba public hospital, overwhelming medical staff. Dozens of wounded fighters and civilians began arriving at the understaffed and ill-equipped hospital which struggled to treat them, leading the [hospital to send out pleas to](#) any available nurses and doctors for assistance. Shahba residents donated blood, medicine and antiseptics to treat the wounded. Moreover, several wounded patients were reportedly later transported to As-Sweida National Hospital on 27 July after the roads reopened, relieving pressure off the public hospital.

Clashes follow broken agreement

The clashes took place after Falhout reneged on an agreement he made with Shahba residents. The agreement was reached on 25 July and stipulated that:

- Falhout would release nine [captive](#) Shahba residents.
- Shahba residents would release the four [kidnapped](#) government officers.
- Shahba residents would open the roads which they had closed.

⁴ They consisted of from armed groups from Shahba (Shahba subdistrict), Ariqa (Ariqa subdistrict), Um Elzaytun (Shahba subdistrict) Zeitoun, and Mazra’a (As-Sweida subdistrict) Mazr’a townships, under the leadership and support of [Harakat Rijal al-Karama](#) (HRK).

- Negotiations would continue to secure Jad al-Tawil’s release at a later stage.

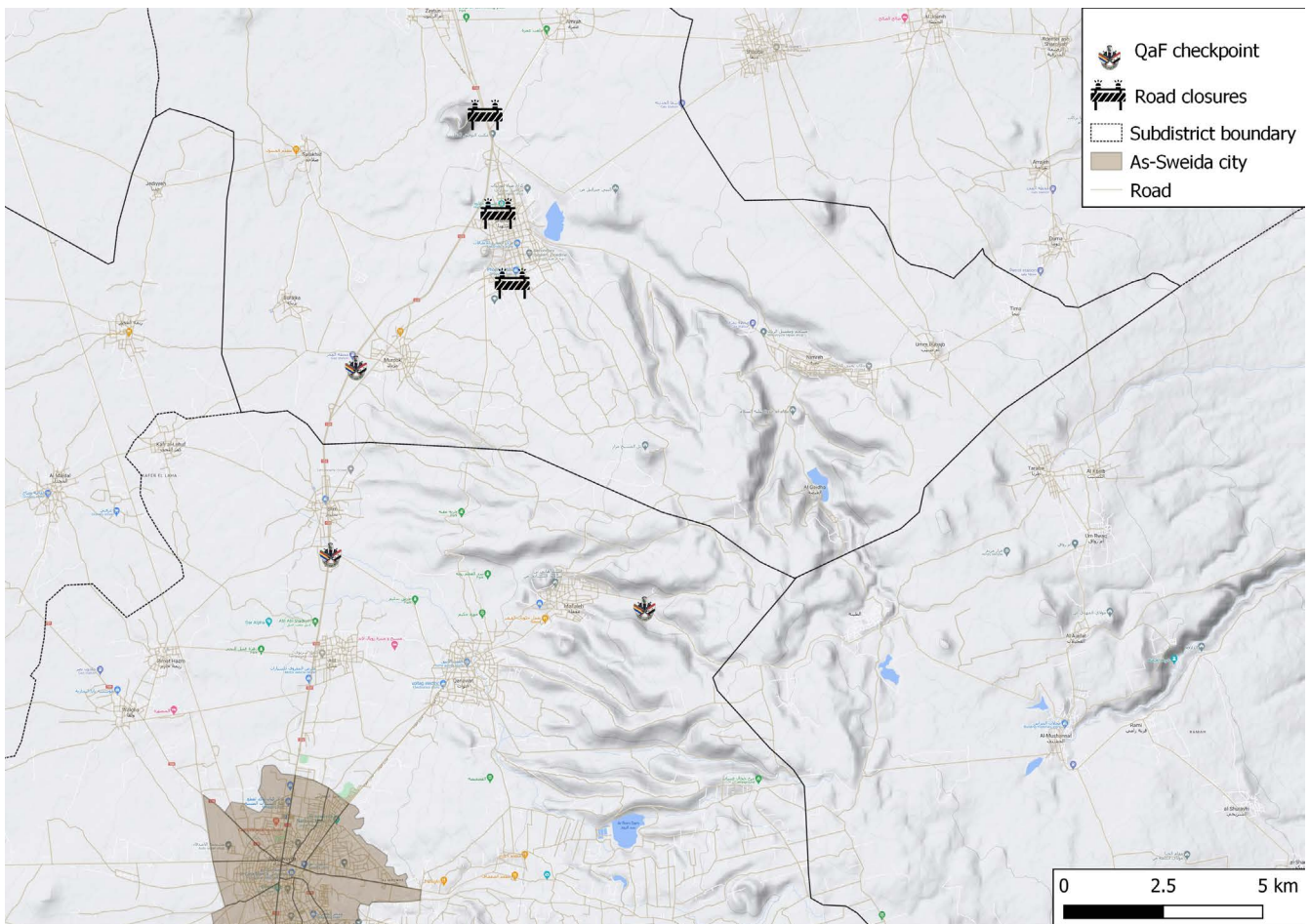
However, Falhout broke the agreement the day after it was reached by [kidnapping](#) Jamal al-Tawil, another Shahba resident and three university [students](#) from the city.

Agreement concludes after days of tensions

The agreement occurred after two days of heightened tensions between the Qouwat al-Fajrr and the Shahba community leaders. Shahba residents reportedly closed roads inside and around Shahba, [including](#) the As-Sweida–Damascus highway, after Qouwat al-Fajrr kidnapped Jad al-Tawil, son of the Tawil family’s *Sayis* (religious leader) Hussein al-Tawil. Qouwat al-Fajrr set up checkpoints on

roads connecting Shahba to As-Sweida city which thoroughly searched vehicles for the city’s residents; Falhout was able to kidnap nine residents. In response, Shahba residents kidnapped four government officers, forcing the Syrian government to step in as a mediator.

Daily life in As-Sweida governorate was partially paralyzed between 23 and 27 July after the As-Sweida–Damascus highway and some secondary roads were closed. Local sources stated that public transportation [stopped](#) working after Qouwat al-Fajrr checkpoints were refusing to let taxis and public buses pass through. Damascus University’s As-Sweida branch [postponed](#) exams, and As-Sweida city’s courthouse [postponed](#) trials. While Qouwat al-Fajrr checkpoints were letting people pass through after searches, many residents, particularly



Map showing the location of road closures by citizens and Qouwat al-Fajrr checkpoints on 23 - 25 July.

those from Shahba, were hesitant to take the trip out of fear for their lives. Media sources later [reported](#) that Qouwat al-Fajr fighters abused Druze Sheikhs and kidnapped taxi drivers from Ariqa.

Dissolution of Qouwat al-Fajr could shift local dynamics

The demise of Qouwat al-Fajr may make the relationship between the different influential actors in the south more fluid: the incident has reshuffled alliances resulting in infighting amongst pro-government groups, further blurring the pro- and anti-government divide.

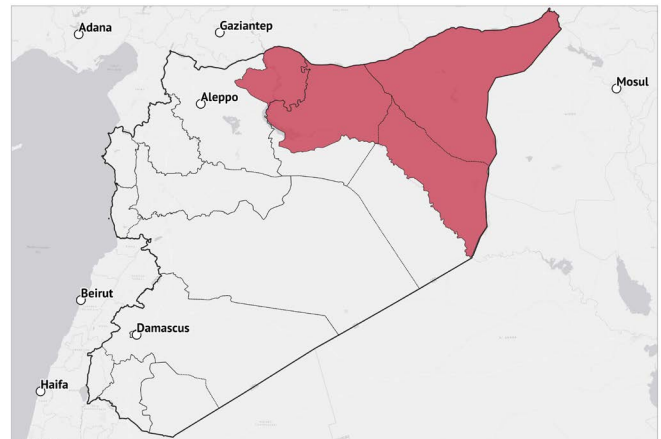
Local sources stated that MID-affiliated armed groups from Ariqa and Um Elzaytun took part in the attack against Qouwat al-Fajr headquarters in Atil and Salim townships in an attempt to absolve themselves of the ties which they share. Bayraq al-Fahed, a previous ally, reportedly refused a request to protect Falhout in Qanawat township and was later [threatened](#) by the members of the armed group in Um Elzaytun.

Additionally, Qouwat al-Fajr is reputed to have acted as the main proxy for MID activities in As-Sweida, which allegedly include kidnapping, murder, and involvement in drug production and trade. The group has also worked alongside the MID, taking part in the [elimination](#) of the [Counter Terrorism Forces](#) in Khazmeh village (Salkhad subdistrict) last month. The elimination of Qouwat al-Fajr is therefore likely to leave a vacuum for the MID to fill, however, the next steps are uncertain; they may replace Falhout with an equally mercenary character, or perhaps adopt a more subtle approach, ensuring continuity of drug production and trade to protect economic interests.

Finally, the incident has prompted more neutral groups, such as Druze religious leaders, to become more critical of the government. A prominent Druze leader, Sheik Hikmat al-Hijiri, has [accused](#) the government of allowing gangs de facto authority to commit their crimes – he went on to say that the

Druze spiritual leadership is capable of “raising the banner of justice” to hold perpetrators accountable if the government fails to do so, in relation to the actions of pro-government armed groups.

Northeast



SDF conscription campaign results in localized tension

On 20 July, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched its annual conscription campaign to identify and recruit military-aged males for service. Local sources throughout northeast Syria, including Menbij, Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor, and Ar-Raqa have indicated that the SDF conscription campaign has led to a proliferation of checkpoints, raids, and arrests and detentions, targeting military-aged males (aged between 18 and 40) for compulsory conscription. Zaidan Al-Aassi, joint head of the Defense Office, stated that a campaign for the “duty of self-defense” was launched on 20 July as “a routine and yearly occurrence.”

As a result, the conscription campaign has sparked tension between local communities and the SDF. In the most notable effort to resist, and in reaction to conscription of university students, demonstrations and a general ‘dignity’ strike were announced on 27 July. Organizers, a group called the Sons of Menbij, put forward 12 demands related to conscription

and the economy: they demanded a suspension of the conscription campaign and the release of individuals (especially students) from conscription detention, the stabilization of fuel and bread prices, increased salaries, and measures to combat corruption, market monopolization, and smuggling (of both contraband and market goods). In response, the SDF announced on 31 July that students would not be released.

US reaffirms support for the SDF

US central command Michael Kurilla [met](#) with the SDF commander in chief, Mazlum Abdi, just days after [visiting](#) the US Army base in al-Tanf. During the meeting, Kurilla reinforced the US stance against a Turkish operation on Administration-held areas, adding their continued support for the SDF to combat ISIS in the region.

The SDF is well known as the US' primary partner in Syria, and continues to receive financial and military support from the coalition, spanning three presidential administrations. Most recently, Joe Biden's [2023 Fiscal Year budget](#) proposal to congress included a \$183.7m allocation to Syrian forces as part of efforts to counter ISIS, \$33 million more than the 2022 budget allocation. While it is not expected that the entirety of this allocation will be provided only to the SDF, such an increase showcases the US' continued interest in investing in anti-ISIS operations and resources in Syria – such interest has likely been exacerbated by recent heightened activity by the extremist group. It is also expected that the US will provide military support through training for over [3,500 SDF fighters](#) throughout the year.

On 13 July, the Pentagon's Middle East policy official Dana Stroul also [noted how](#) a Turkish incursion could potentially destabilize the region, both in terms of security and its people; "ISIS is going to take advantage of that [a potential Turkish] campaign, not to mention the humanitarian impact." She highlighted the large number of suspected ISIS

fighters held in SDF-run camps and prisons and the need to support security of them.

While there is no explicit indication or evidence to suggest a direct linkage, long-standing tensions between the SDF and the communities under its control – particularly in Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, and Menbij, as a result of annual conscription campaigns (among many other factors) – do not necessarily bode well for the continued efforts to combat ISIS throughout the region.

Turkish incursion discussed at Astana summit in Tehran

On 19 July, Ebrahim Rais, the Iranian president, hosted a summit within the Astana framework in Tehran, to which Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan attended. In the tripartite meeting, the presidents discussed current affairs in Syria, stressing their "determination to continue fighting terrorism in the country," according to the concluding joint statement. In the joint statement, the three leaders [rejected](#) what they deemed as "creating new realities on the ground under the pretext of fighting terrorism, including the illegitimate initiatives of autonomy," adding "achieving security and stability in the region is only possible in the shadow of preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country".

As expected, Erdogan [renewed](#) his stance on conducting an attack on northeast Syria but left the summit without support for the potential incursion, and a public rejection from his Iranian and Russian counterparts; "As the guarantors of Astana, our expectation from Russia and Iran is for them to support Turkey in this fight," stated Erdogan. Erdogan then reiterated Turkey's geographically-specific intentions for such an offensive, adding; "Tel Refaat and Menbij remain hotbeds of terrorists." Putin and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, however, had already advised [against](#) an attack, highlighting that the three powers do not agree in regards to a military operation.

Russia and Iran may have overlapping interests in either preserving the status quo or pursuing a handover of SDF territory – particularly Tel Refaat – to Damascus and its local allies. In support of the latter, deployment of government forces indicates an intolerance for the expansion of SNA-controlled territory in northern Aleppo. The possibility of Turkey acting unilaterally on this remains viable; in the meantime, Turkey has increased its attacks on SDF-held positions throughout northern Aleppo and northeast Syria; drone strikes, shelling, and artillery fire have primarily taken place in Tal Refaat, rural Menbij, and in areas adjacent to the SNA-controlled Peace Spring zone.

Markets continue to react; household movement freezes

Fears of a Turkish operation have had a profound impact on Menbij markets and have compelled some residents to relocate in anticipation. The different measures taken by both the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government have led to increased fuel and food prices in the area. The Autonomous Administration [announced](#) a state of emergency on 6 July following increased Turk-

ish threats and skirmishes on the border with the SNA, allowing it to commandeer the available resources it deems necessary to defend its areas. The 6 July state of emergency gave priority to the SDF for fuel to facilitate its mobilization. Additionally, local sources stated that Syrian government forces deployed in rural Menbij, presumably either to assist the SDF, repel Turkish-backed armed actors, or both. Syrian government-aligned forces are also being prioritized in terms of fuel provision, leaving civilians struggling to secure their share. In light of the significantly reduced supply, the black market price of fuel has increased approximately 11% since the end of May (see below).

Food prices also increased in Menbij in anticipation of a Turkish-backed offensive (see below). Local sources reported that Al-Tayha crossing, 22km southwest of Menbij city, was closed by Syrian government forces after the area was declared a military zone. Al-Tayha is an official crossing between Syrian government and Administration-held areas through which food, medicine, and other essential items are traded. Local sources also indicated that traders began stockpiling inventory of certain items, such as sugar, as Turkish threats increased.

Item	30 May (Price in SYP)	27 July (Price in SYP)	% change
Gas canister	45000	50000	11
Petrol (1L)	3000	4500	11

Fuel price difference in Menbij between 20 May and 27 July

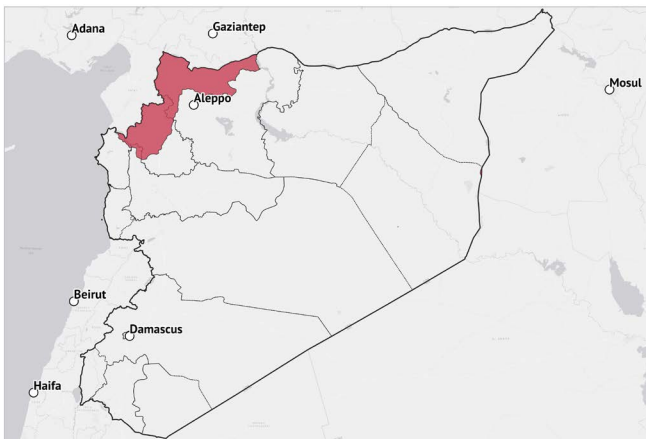
Item	30 May (Price in SYP)	27 July (Price in SYP)	% change
Non-subsidized bread	2000	3000	50
Bulghur	3800	4000	5
Rice	3500	4000	14
Sugar	2800	4500	61
Lamb mince	18000	20000	11
Beef mince	13500	16000	19
Lentils	6500	7500	15
Chickpea	4000	4500	13
Eggs	9000	10000	11

Food price differences in Menbij between 30 May and 27 July

Furthermore, the Syrian pound depreciated an additional 5% since 30 May, dropping from 3,980 to 4,170 SYP per USD on 31 July, contributing to an increase in market prices. That said, it has been reported that all items are generally available in the market, albeit at varying supply.

Significant population movements or displacement did not take place, as compared to last month, indicating that fears of an imminent offensive may have abated. However, IDPs from towns and villages bordering Turkey did not return to their homes; the SDF reportedly considers the border region a military zone and is temporarily prohibiting households from returning, allegedly for their safety. Local sources have also reported that IDPs are also hesitant to return due to the large presence of Syrian government forces present in the area. However, the same sources note that some of the Menbij traders who relocated to Ar-Raqqa governorate last month have returned to Menbij while maintaining contingency storage and inventory located in Ar-Raqqa, should Turkey decide to launch an offensive.

Northwest



Security Council extends cross-border aid for further six months

On 12 July, the UN Security Council adopted [Resolution 2642](#) and renewed the mandate of the mechanism for the delivery of UN humanitarian aid

across the border from Turkey to Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. The renewal of the cross-border mandate, most notably, is for only six months (expiring 10 January 2023) and stipulated that an additional extension for six months would require a separate resolution. This is a marked departure from the previous resolutions 2165 (2014), and the eight subsequent renewals, all of which were valid for 12 months, until 2504 in 2021 which was also for six months. The duration of the renewal, the tenuous negotiations and failed Security Council votes that preceded the adoption of 2642 highlight the potential that the UN-mandated cross-border humanitarian operations into northwest Syria may be on their last legs despite the prolonged and far-reaching humanitarian needs in the region.

After two unsuccessful votes, the new resolution was approved by the Security Council, largely in line with Russian proposals. During intense and difficult negotiations, where the main point of contention was the length of the mandate, Russia vetoed a draft resolution proposed by Norway and Ireland on 8 July, which included a one-year duration. Similarly, the US, UK and France voted the Russian draft resolution, which included an extension for only six months; the ten non-permanent Security Council members abstained from voting on the Russian draft, while China voted in favor of the resolution. Subsequently, Russia agreed to the revised Norway–Ireland proposal for six months, while the US, UK and France abstained from voting. The amendment came after Russia's deputy ambassador, Dmitry Polyansky, [warned](#) that “unless council members decide to go with the Russian six-month proposal, he saw no possibility of an agreement”.

The importance of Bab al-Hawa and the impact of its closure

Bab al-Hawa is the only and last crossing through which UN aid is allowed to enter northwest Syria, home to more than 4 million Syrians, including 2.8 million IDPs. In 2021, more than [9,500 trucks](#) loaded with humanitarian aid entered through Bab al-Hawa heading to Idleb and western Aleppo gov-

ernorates – it is therefore considered the main life-line for the region. Households in northwest Syria continue to experience difficult humanitarian conditions amid economic crisis; at least 2.4 million people [depend](#) on aid provided by the current UN-led cross-border response to meet their basic needs (80% women and children) every month through the cross-border delivery mechanism, while 4.1 million individuals need aid in total. Moreover, the Response Coordination Group (RCG) stated that the percentage of families living in [poverty](#) increased from 86.93% in July to 86.4% in June.

Expected future deterioration of humanitarian situation

The above numbers indicate that the economic situation in northwest Syria could further deteriorate in the lead-up to the cross-border renewal next January. The humanitarian situation will also be negatively impacted by predictable – albeit severe – needs associated with the winter season. In January 2022, areas in northwest Syria were hit by several rain and snow storms, leading to floods and below-freezing temperatures in many areas (IDP camps in particular but not exclusively). Additional obstacles created by the uncertainty of a renewal and potential non-renewal will apply more pressure on NGOs planning processes; several organizations have indicated that the current renewal for six months is not enough and will lead to significant challenges for winterization planning.

Additionally, at a time when many humanitarian actors are calling to authorize more crossings to expand cross-border aid operations, the current resolution reaffirmed that the Bab al-Hawa crossing would be the only one open for cross-border aid. Russian negotiators have emphasized increasing cross-line aid in the future. Scaling up cross-line aid, should a renewal fail in January, is a tall task; approximately 800 aid trucks cross through Bab al-Hawa per month, [compared](#) to only about 70 trucks, or five convoys, that have entered from government-held areas since July 2021. It is highly doubtful that cross-line aid will be a sufficient

substitute for aid arriving from Turkey, especially with the presence of potential obstacles exerted by the Syrian government, particularly in terms of programmatic activities, community targeting, and beneficiary selection. This reluctance was echoed in a [statement by US Deputy Representative to the UN, Richard Mills](#), on 12 July: “Let us remember that this mandate exists because the Assad regime has a well-documented history of corruption, of stealing aid, and of denying it to communities in need.”

Potential impact of cross-line assistance on local dynamics

If the focus will be on increasing the cross-line aid operations during the implementation period of the resolution in the next six months, it is expected that this operation will affect some of the dynamics that exist between the various parties in northwest Syria. In a post-cross border resolution landscape, the balance between objectives – practical, in terms of ensuring humanitarian needs are served, and ideological, such as political opposition to the Syrian government – of stakeholders in northwest Syria and northern Aleppo will likely need to be recalibrated. This recalibration will likely involve negotiating a series of relationships: between local communities and controlling actors, between competing de facto governance bodies, and between governance actors and their associated armed groups.

As a stark example, one of the first cross-line convoys, in August 2021, [was subjected to a wide wave of criticism](#) by activists in northwest Syria, accusing Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the SSG of coordinating with the Syrian government and trying to normalize relationships between them and pave the way for reopening the crossings between the two parties, which was widely rejected by civilians at that time. At the same time, it was clear that HTS had the desire to [reopen](#) these crossings immediately after their closure, in April 2020, it being an important source of income for them; however this

step was reversed at the time due to public pressure and demonstrations in front of the crossing.

Furthermore, all cross-line convoys in the past year have entered through government-held crossings; in a hypothetical expansion of (or reliance on) these cross-line deliveries, additional crossings may be open with the SNA-controlled areas in northern Aleppo. The fear with the northwest is that cross-line aid may be used as a Syrian government stick and/or carrot depending on its priorities and strategy vis-a-vis the SSG and SIG and its associated armed groups. Finally, it is feasible that should there be efforts to disrupt a hypothetical cross-line delivery of aid, tension may build between communities in dire need of aid and the actors behind such a disruption.

Assad visits Aleppo for the first time since 2011

On 8 July, Bashar al-Assad visited the city of Aleppo for the first time since the beginning of the conflict. During the visit, the president attended the inauguration of a rehabilitation project for a thermal electricity plant. According to announcements, the plant is expected to produce 200 megawatts to feed the city of Aleppo.

Assad also attended the launch of water pumping operations, intended to irrigate 8,500 hectares of



Bashar and Asma al-Assad visiting Aleppo. (Source: Syrian Presidency channel on Telegram)

agricultural land; both stations are located in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. The next day, Assad performed the Eid al-Adha prayer in Aleppo and toured the markets of the old city with his family. He was then briefed on the ongoing restoration work in the Umayyad Mosque.

Meaning behind the visit

As a decades-long tradition, Assad, and his father and former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, have historically made use of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha prayers every year to showcase public support by meeting with a select group of local stakeholders. Since the beginning of the conflict, these occasions have gained more symbolism, as Assad would select newly captured areas to emphasize the ‘victories’ of the Syrian Arab Army and its regained control, such as the Eid al-Adha prayer in [Daraya](#) in Damascus countryside in September 2016.

As for Aleppo, government forces regained control of the city in 2016 with the assistance of Russia and Iran; Assad [declared](#) at the time that “Aleppo is writing history now.” Despite this, Assad has not visited Aleppo since regaining control; at the time, unconfirmed rumors circulated that this was due to an unannounced [understanding](#) between Russia and Turkey, whereby Assad was dissuaded from visiting the city to celebrate his ‘victory.’

Undoubtedly, this visit carries messages directed toward a variety of audiences. Aleppo also served as one of the most important economic Syrian epicenters before the conflict; the visit could also suggest that Aleppo, from the perspective of the Syrian government, offers a stable environment for large-scale investment and redevelopment, similar to development projects throughout greater Damascus. It is also notable, though very likely coincidental, that this visit took place during Security Council negotiations on the renewal of the UN cross-border mandate.

Furthermore, the visit coincides with Turkish threats to launch a military operation in north-

ern Syria; therefore the visit may be the result of a Russian-Iranian green light to deliver a message to Turkey that the Syrian government is present to confront the Turkish threats in areas of Russian-Iranian influence. What enhances this possibility is the [agreement](#) made between the Syrian government and SDF at the beginning of July to send reinforcements from government forces to points of contact with Turkish forces and the SNA.

Signs of improved Turkish-Syrian relations

It seems that perhaps Turkey may be susceptible to Assad's assertion of control in the area, even if as a lesser of two evils from the Turkish perspective, in comparison to the SDF. This is reflected by a statement from Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, indicating Turkey is willing to [support](#) the Syrian government against the SDF. This statement could be for purposes other than actual alignment of interests or potentially indicate the [beginnings of a rapprochement](#) between the two parties; in fact, Turkey announced the existence of intelligence and security coordination between the two parties, the [most recent in June 2022](#).

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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.

