

# Syria Monthly Report



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# Overview

## International news

Rumors have circulated that the US government is considering removing sanctions in northern Syria, in areas outside the control of the Syrian government.

### 1-14 March

Devastating winter storms hit northwest Syria, with residents and IDPs in temporary shelters seeking new, often dangerous, ways to heat their homes and repair damaged properties.

### 11 March

President Putin approves the deployment of volunteers to fight alongside the Russian army and Russian-backed armed groups in Ukraine.

### 18 March

President Assad visits the UAE, in the first official visit to an Arab country since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

### 22 March

Ak Energy increases electricity prices in northern Aleppo, a decision which was met by protests by residents struggling to cope with regular hikes and higher energy bills.

### 28 March

Teachers hold protests across the northeast, calling for their salaries to be pegged to the black market rate of the Syrian pound amid its depreciation.

## Ongoing

Price increases have been seen across the whole of Syria, largely attributed to the secondary effects of instability and Russian bans on grain exports as a result of the Russian–Ukrainian war. Markets in southern Syria in particular have seen supplies of food going down, while prices continue to rise – the coming of Ramadan is also considered a factor, with traders hoarding items to sell them at higher prices in anticipation of increased demand. In northeast Syria the Autonomous Administration faces continued protest against its inability to provide basic goods and services, exacerbated by instability to the west.



*Winter storms hit camps in northwest Syria, where IDPs struggle to cope with freezing temperatures and damage to temporary shelters.*

*Image source: Response Coordination Group [Facebook]*

# International

## Removal of sanctions, Syrian government response, Assad's UAE visit, and implications

*US to exempt Syrian north and northeast from Caesar Act*

Multiple news reports have indicated that the Biden administration is considering the exemption of the Syrian north and northeast from sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.

Idleb, held by the opposition's Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), and Afrin, held by the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG), would be excluded from the decision. Further, media reports have stated that the decision would not include exemptions to the gas and oil sector. This is largely due to government-held areas benefiting from the fuel coming in from the oil fields in the northeast.

*Damascus, Ankara and Washington respond*

In reaction to the news, on 13 March, pro-Syrian government newspaper Al-Watan [stated](#) that the decision aims to “fuel separatist tendencies and legitimize the smuggling of stolen Syrian oil” – accusations levied against the Autonomous Administration currently in power in the northeast. Additionally, the Turkish government has reportedly objected along the lines that the exemptions could legitimize the Syrian Democratic Forces, considered a terrorist group in Turkey.

Some US Congress members have also [rejected](#) the idea, with concerns that the Biden administration would be reducing pressure on the Assad government, while failing to explain the importance of the exemptions and their association with US objectives for northern Syria. News [reports](#) have indicated that the Biden administration continues to

oppose any reconstruction efforts led by the Syrian government. In exempting the north and northeast from the Caesar act, these areas could be opened up to increased business opportunities.

*Assad visits UAE following decade of regional isolation*

Diplomatically, Bashar al-Assad's recent visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on 18 March marks a major step forward in Syrian-Emirati relations and reflects a broader trend of improved regional cooperation with the isolated Syrian government. The visit [coincided](#) with the 11th anniversary of the Syrian conflict; Assad's meetings with Emirati rulers reportedly focussed on how the UAE could support Syria politically, and through humanitarian aid, as well as how economic ties could be improved between the nations. Controversy has followed the visit, given UAE's longstanding position as a US ally and its previous commitments to [isolating the Syrian government and sponsoring armed opposition](#) groups. It also carries significant implications for the post-conflict order in Syria, where UAE, through its economic capacity, could bolster reconstruction efforts.

There are multiple ways in which this visit, Assad's first to an Arab country since the onset of the conflict in Syria, benefits the Syrian government and its allies. Assad's welcome in Abu Dhabi [by UAE's highest-ranking officials](#), including Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan and UAE's Prime Minister Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, represents the possibility of support for Damascus in a region which has distanced itself from Syria since the onset of the conflict in 2011.

The symbolic value of this is extremely important, at a time when the Syrian government's domestic legitimacy is struggling with the ongoing socio-economic deterioration in its territories of control. The visit may also signify increased Emirati participation in short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation projects.

### *US “profoundly disappointed”*

The hosting of Assad in Abu Dhabi was condemned by the US State Department as [profoundly disappointing](#). Anthony Blinken, secretary of state, went on to say that the US does not support efforts to rehabilitate Assad, or to normalize relations with Damascus. US relations with the UAE, considered an ally, are already [strained](#), made worse by the Arab nation’s reluctance to join the US-led Security Council Resolution condemning Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine.

Emirati motives for rapprochement with the Syrian government are also tied to its desire to grow its global partnerships and financial interests; this includes improved relations with Russia, with many [oligarchs decamping](#) to Abu Dhabi and Dubai to avoid sanctions. [Russia’s support for Assad](#) was therefore key to the UAE’s invitation to host the leader. Within Syria itself, a publication by the European Council on Foreign Relations emphasizes UAE’s pursuit of early economic leverage in Syria, in line with its expanding commercial network, which in 2019 established a [2,500-kilometer transport corridor](#) connecting the Jabal Ali Port in Dubai with the Nassib-Jaber crossing at the Syrian–Jordanian borders.

### *Syrian government’s standing amid recent developments*

It remains early at this point to discuss any concrete implications of Assad’s visit to the UAE on the socio-economic situation in Syria. Assad’s visit to the UAE is an indicator of the willingness of some countries in the region to further normalize their relations with the government after a decade-long strain, and while such developments may see further economic engagement between the two countries, maintaining sanctions on government-held areas indicates a fragmentation in the international community’s approach towards Damascus, even among allies.

Despite the potential economic benefits of Syria’s seemingly increasing reengagement with regional powers and continued efforts of normalization, and while short-term humanitarian assistance is necessary, long-term infrastructure and reconstruction projects are unlikely to happen as long as political/territorial fragmentation, systemic corruption, US-led sanctions, and high levels of insecurity remain defining features of Syria’s political and economic landscape.

## Syrian fighters in Ukraine, Russia

Since the onset of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine on 24 February, there has been continuous discussion of the recruitment of Syrian fighters by both parties in this conflict, with greater emphasis on pro-Russian recruitment in areas controlled by the Syrian government.

While there is no decisive evidence confirming the participation of Syrian fighters in the conflict, the deployment of Syrians as mercenaries has previously been reported in [Libya](#), [Azerbaijan](#) and [Venezuela](#). A decade of conflict and poor socioeconomic conditions have meant Syrian soldiers and young men are open for [recruitment](#) by states, armed non-state actors, paramilitary groups, criminal networks, and private military security companies.

### *Recruitment in government-held areas*

Russian recruitment of Syrian fighters in government-held areas can be seen as a return of favor to Russia for its significant role [helping the Assad government regain](#) control against opposition forces since September 2015. On 11 March, Putin [approved](#) the deployment of volunteers to fight alongside the Russian army and Russian-backed armed groups in Ukraine, while defense minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that an estimated 16,000 fighters from the Middle East are willing to fight for Russia. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) [reported](#) that more than 40,000 Syrians have registered to fight for Russia, however none have been deployed so far.



These estimates remain hard to verify and prone to manipulation, particularly given the high level of political polarization the conflict in Ukraine has created. Recruitment procedures have so far been reported in [eastern Deir-Ez-Zor](#), rural Homs, [Hama](#), [southern Damascus](#), [eastern Ghouta](#), [Latakia and Tartous](#). Various security and military branches affiliated with the Syrian government, in addition to Russian-affiliated groups and private military companies, are reportedly leading the recruitment efforts. For example, media sources indicated that the Wagner Group, made up of Russian and pro-Russian mercenaries, has [recruited](#) fighters stationed in eastern Rural Homs (the desert area) and eastern Deir Ez-Zor, both areas where the group has an established presence surrounding oil fields.

Moreover, Syrians for Truth and Justice, which reports on human rights violations in Syria, presented anecdotal evidence that [reconciliation officers and the Air Force Intelligence branch](#) are involved in recruitment within Rural Damascus governorate, while other sources pointed that the National Defense Forces (NDF) and the Wagner Group are [jointly recruiting](#) in the area of Sahel al Ghab, Hama countryside. To add, local sources indicated that recruitment in southern Damascus (specifically Babella, Yalda, and Beit Sahem) is led by Abou Hani Shammout, an ex-opposition leader and a Russian citizen, who acts as the primary security focal point in the area and has been recruiting locals for a number of years.

For recruits, media and local sources emphasize that the recruitment process is more selective than was the case for Libya, with [experience in urban warfare](#), [military service under Russian supervision](#), and/or [affiliation with groups closely linked to Russia](#) (Brigade 25 or Tiger Forces, the Fifth Corps, ISIS Hunters, Al-Sayyad Group) being strongly recommended. Interestingly, local sources reported that recruitment efforts in the area of Wadi An-Nasara (western rural Homs) are specifically targeting the Christian community, although there is no sufficient evidence to further corroborate this claim.

In relation to contracts, the available information is muddled by discrepancies, especially when it comes to proposed salaries. While some sources estimated the monthly-based salaries at a range between [\\$300–\\$600](#) (for six-month contracts), others suggested a higher range between [\\$1,500–\\$2500](#), a more realistic range when compared with the salaries of Syrian fighters in Libya. Nevertheless, multiple variables may affect the salaries offered, such as level of fighting experience and the type of military and security responsibilities the recruits will be handling in Ukraine (for example, front-line fighting, security in captured territory, guarding of facilities).

As things currently stand, there has been no reliable proof of pro-Russian Syrian fighters present in Ukraine, although local sources in Ukraine claimed a group of Syrian fighters were already stationed close to the city of Sumy in the country's northeast. Media sources indicated that several [lists of applicants were sent](#) to Hmeimim Airbase in Latakia, while others added that the Wagner Group has been [relocating Syrian fighters from Libya](#) to Syria, as a preliminary step to transfer them to Russia.

Furthermore, the SOHR reported that Brigade 25 (or Tiger Forces) is currently holding [intensive military drills](#), upon Russian instruction, in southern Idleb, Hama, and eastern rural Homs. Ukrainian military intelligence sources support the claim that Syrian fighters have been transferred at least to the Russian and Belarussian borders with Ukraine, pointing out their potential presence in Gomel (Belarus) and Rostov Oblast (Russia).

*Turkish interests dictate pro-Ukrainian recruitment in northwest*

Prior to Putin's approval to recruit pro-Russian foreign fighters, Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, stated on 27 February that Ukraine was establishing an [International Legion](#) which would welcome and support foreign volunteers willing to fight Russia; according to the Ukrainian Defense Ministry, around 20,000 fighters from 52 countries

are [participating](#) in battles alongside the Ukrainian army, though such figures cannot be accurately verified. It is thought that Syrian fighters from Turkish-controlled areas of the northwest may also consider fighting alongside these forces.

The stance toward pro-Ukrainian recruitment in areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) has been largely shaped by Turkey's geopolitical and economic interests. Turkey, a NATO member, has so far maintained a neutral position towards the conflict in Ukraine and has suggested itself as a potential [mediator](#) in Russian–Ukrainian negotiations towards a peaceful resolution.

On one hand, Turkey is expected to maintain a position that is consistent with the NATO condemnation of Russia's intervention, a position it expressed by [recognizing the conflict in Ukraine as a war](#) and [condemning Russia](#) in the UN. On the other hand, however, Turkey's economy is strongly linked with both Russia and Ukraine, having achieved a [2021 record high trade volume](#) with both countries estimated at \$42.1 billion. Moreover, Russia reportedly accounts for around [45% of Turkey's gas imports and 70% of its wheat imports](#). These figures explain Erdogan's [refusal](#) to join the anti-Russia EU sanctions, at a time where the economic situation in Turkey continues to deteriorate, with inflation rates hitting a [20-year high](#) this month at 61.14%.

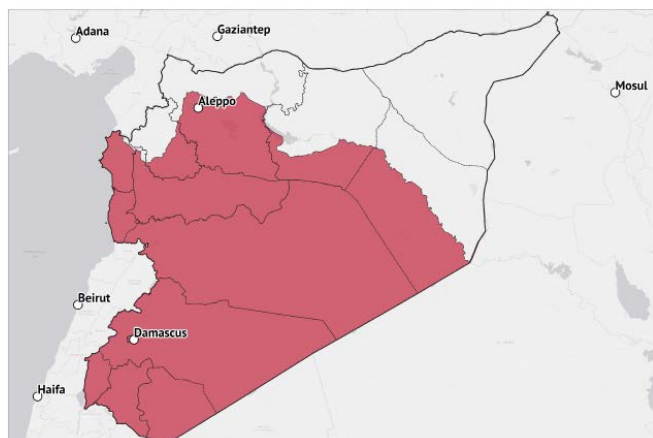
That said, Turkish authorities, well-aware of ongoing pro-Ukrainian recruitment efforts in SIG areas, have [neither encouraged nor obstructed](#) these processes. Turkey also holds the final [approval of the transfer](#) of fighters from Syria to Ukraine, which according to local sources, would take place through the province of Kilis. Syrians for Truth and Justice claimed that there are [indirect Turkish instructions](#) for opposition groups to recruit 1,300 fighters experienced with heavy weaponry for six-month contracts, in return for monthly salaries estimated at \$1,500. Anecdotal evidence indicates that multiple fighters from the Sultan Murad Brigade, Brigade 213, Suleiman Shah Brigade, and Hamza Division have [registered](#) their names, but little information

is available on exact numbers. There are also no reports yet of any transfer of recruits from SIG areas to Ukraine, which is so far consistent with Turkey's official policy.

Another variable to take into consideration here is the [state of fragmentation and internal infighting](#) which currently characterizes the Syrian National Army. Applications for recruitment in SIG areas by members of Turkish-backed opposition groups not only reflect socio-economic necessities or Turkish stipulations, but may also be seen as an attempt for armed groups to achieve leverage against their local rivals. It is worth noting here that pro-Ukrainian recruitment is taking place mostly within the ranks of groups which enjoy particularly close ties with Turkey and have previously fought in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh (including the Sultan Murad and Hamza Division). This is in contrast with the Levant Front, a major opposition faction whose relationship with Turkey has been marked by tensions and disagreements, which has been translated in the group's refusal to act as Turkish proxy in either Libya or Azerbaijan.

Local sources further elaborate on this point, indicating that Turkey, in an attempt to absorb the demands of the factions it sponsors, has allowed the reopening of Abu Zandin crossing and Al Jatal crossing with SDF and Syrian government territories respectively. The same sources added that the reopening primarily benefits the Tha'eroon Movement (including the Al Mu'tasim Brigade), Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, Hamza Division, and Sultan Murad Brigade. Therefore, Turkey's position toward recruitment in SIG areas is not only shaped by its economic and diplomatic interests, but also with the need to preserve the precarious cohesion of the SNA, reduce discontent within the groups it backs, and consequently stabilize the security situation in northwest Syria.

# South & central



## Prices increase further following Russian–Ukrainian conflict

Markets in Syrian government-held areas have witnessed additional price increases and missing food items following the start of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. In Damascus city, Mohamad Nazir al-Sayid Hassan, council president for Al-Bazouriya market in Damascus, [told](#) pro-government media that market trading has reached a near stand-still. Hassan stated that some shops are missing half of their items, adding that most commodity prices have in-

creased. In As-Sweida, residents [complained](#) that recent price increases in the governorate’s markets have greatly increased their food insecurity, further reducing their ability to afford essential items (shown below). In Lattakia, shop owners complained about the unavailability of food items such as sugar, legumes, and sunflower oil in addition to price increases exceeding 25%.

The Consumer Protection Association [stated](#) on 26 March that recent price increases have led to a marked drop in market activity, with citizens window shopping for food items that are becoming increasingly unaffordable; many families are purchasing only half of the food items they need.

### *Oil shortages in markets*

With disruptions taking place in Syrian government markets, sunflower oil supply disruptions and price increases have been particularly acute. Hassan stated that oils are among the items missing from Al-Bazouriya market, with prices increasing in response to poor supply.

In As-Sweida, pro-government media [reported](#) a drastic decrease in sunflower oil availability coinciding with a sharp increase in its price. The Syria Trade Establishment (STE) director in As-Swei-

Food items	February 24 (SYP)	March 15 (SYP)	Percentage change
Unsubsidized bread	2500	2900	16%
Bulgur	3000	5200	73%
Short-grain rice	2800	4800	71%
Long-grain rice	3500	5500	57%
Sugar	2900	3200	10%
Bananas	4200	5300	26%
Cooking oil	11000	16000	45%

*Price increases in As Sweida between 24 February and March 15, 2022 (Source: HAT)*

da, Rabih Ghanem, [stated](#) that vegetable oil prices reached 15,000 SYP per liter and 55,000 SYP for a 4 liter bottle, a significant increase on the official price of 9,500 SYP. In Lattakia, sunflower oil is hard to find, and is also being sold at 15,000 SYP.

### *Syrian government looks to appease citizens*

Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection, Amro Salem, [blamed](#) the Russian–Ukrainian conflict for the recent shortages in markets. Salem stated that it had impacted the global price of sunflower oil, including in Syria, increasing it by 40%. He added that there is still enough bottled oil in the market and that the government has alternative sources and is doing everything to ensure the product continues to be supplied. Salem has also blamed price increases on traders hoarding their produce, in order to force price increase ahead of Ramadan on 2 April – this is a common practice during this time.

In response, traders [told](#) pro-government media that the current cost of purchasing one bottle is 14,000 SYP and that they have priced them at 15,000 SYP to make a small profit. The discrepancy with official prices and the possibility that they could be fined for selling above the official price has meant many have decided to remove the item from the market to avoid an altercation with the authorities. Moreover, media sources [reported](#) some level of panic buying, further contributing to the increase.

## Russian–Ukrainian conflict disrupts wheat imports

Wheat shortages in Syrian government-held areas have also been raised as an issue following potential import disruptions due to the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. The Syrian government imports around 1.5 million tonnes of wheat annually, mostly from Russia, to cover the significant gap in domestic

supply.<sup>1</sup> Local production in Syrian government areas has been insufficient to cover demand given reduced agricultural subsidies, increasing costs of production, and the presence of major agricultural lands in the country's northeast, outside of its control. Moreover, it seems that local production may be less than the previous year, potentially further increasing the need for imports. The director of Plant Production at the Ministry of Agriculture, Ahmad Haidar, [stated](#) that areas of wheat cultivation are down from 1.5 million hectares in 2021 to 1.2 million hectares. Additionally, precipitation data shows a decrease in rainfall levels in some agriculturally vital subdistricts in government areas, pointing to a higher risk of severe drought (shown below).

The Russian government's grain export ban on 14 March gave rise to concerns on the impact on the Syrian government's ability to import much needed wheat, leading to shortages. However, the Russian [ban](#) is specifically for Eurasian Economic Union (EUEA) countries, with Syria exempt.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, wheat imports remain an issue for two reasons: First, the government may be unable to afford to import grain from Russia, regardless of exemptions from the ban. Abdel Latif al-Amin, head of the Syria Grain Establishment, [said](#) that wheat import costs had increased from \$317 to \$400 per tonne as a result of a rise in insurance costs. Second, media sources have raised concerns regarding Russia's willingness to commit to pre-existing wheat import contracts: As has already been seen, in January 2021 six Russian wheat export companies reneged on their deals to provide wheat to Syria as domestic self-sufficiency became a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, former member of the Agricultural planning council, Abdel Hadi al-Khatib, stated back in December 2021 that two wheat import contracts which the government had signed to import 1 million tonnes

1 Al-Mashreq. [حم قلات اءاءاءم ل لؤاضء عم اى روسى ف اى سور ءن اكم ع ءارت](#). March 2022

2 EUEA countries include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.



of wheat had been stalled at the time following a 10% increase in wheat prices in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Concerns over Russia’s willingness to export wheat while at war are therefore not unfounded, particularly with the increasing global economic pressure on Russia in the form of sanctions.

*Government denies wheat supply problems*

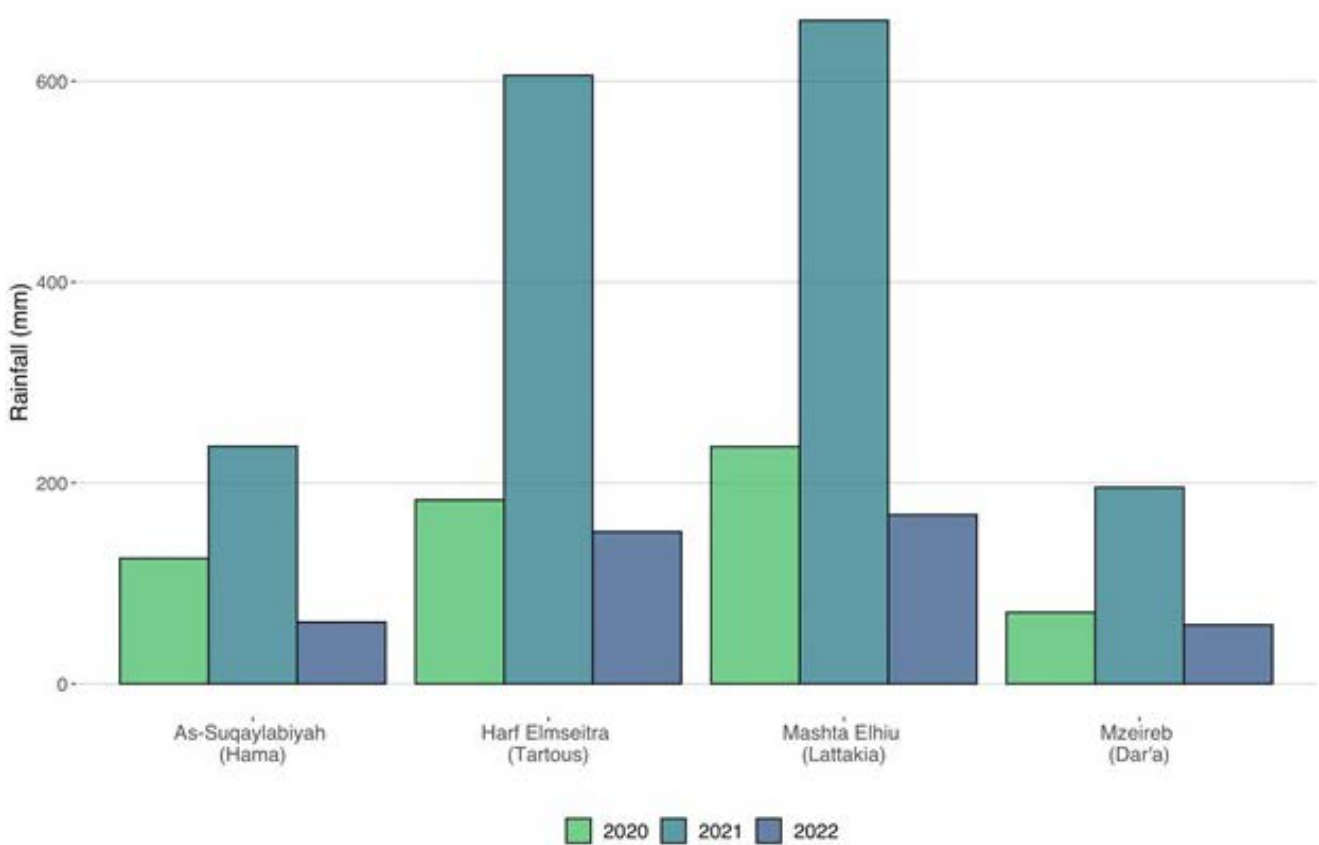
The Syrian government has denied the possibility of wheat supply disruptions. Hussein Arnous, Syrian Prime minister, [told](#) pro-government media on 15 March that Syria has a sufficient amount of wheat and that wheat and food imports continue.

Arnous added that the government “has not spared any plot of land which it hasn’t cultivated to improve agricultural production” and has supported

wheat production through fertilizer and diesel provision “within its limited capability.”

Moreover, Salem remained unconcerned with questions relating to wheat and bread availability. He [stated](#) on 18 March that the government’s wheat reserves would be sufficient and that Syria was not expecting wheat import disruptions when “all imports come from our friend, Russia”.

In response to the developments in the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, the Syrian government initially took measures to mitigate the potential impact. On 24 February, it [decided](#) to further ration and guide the distribution of essential food items (wheat, sugar, oil, rice, potatoes) and fuel in addition to taking stock of the current reserves which it has. On 2 March it [announced](#) that it would be stopping



*Year-on-year precipitation data in agriculturally vital subdistricts (Source: HAT)*

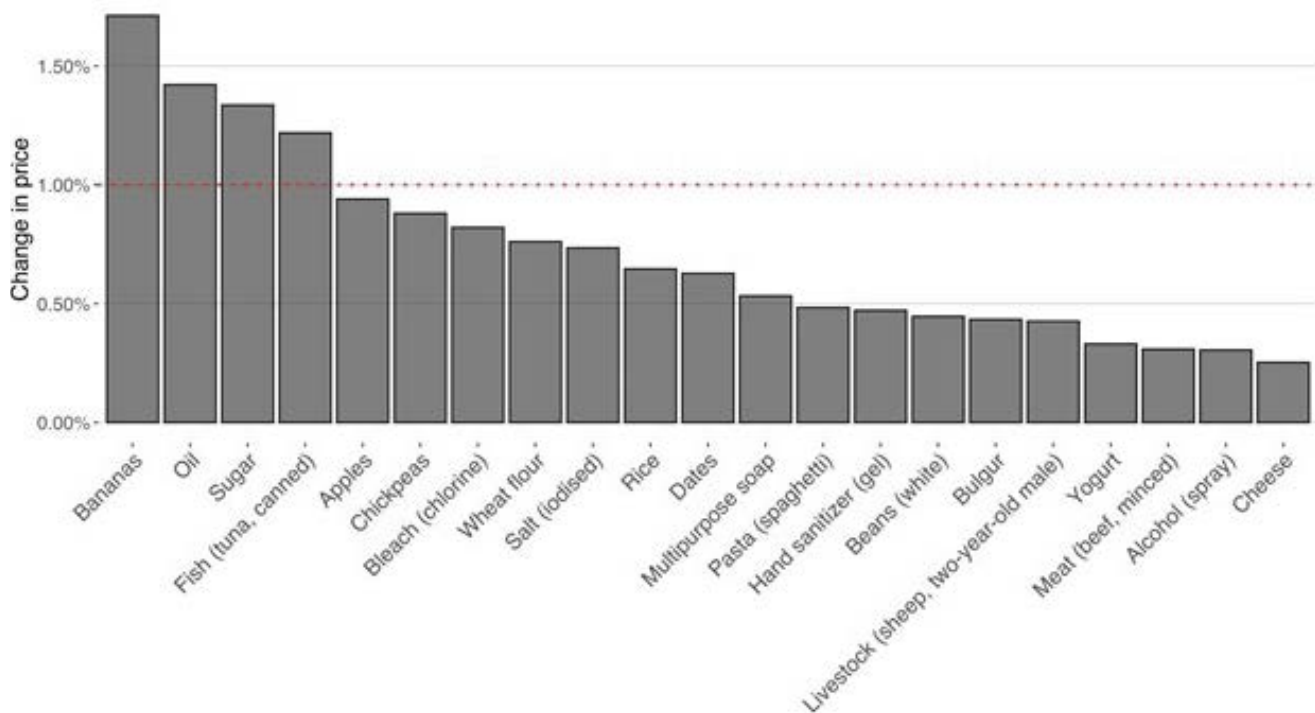
3 SP-Today. [ايسور نم داريت سال دوق ع ل ط ع ت ل ظ ي ف داف ن ل ا ي ل ع ف ر ا ش ي ا ي ر و س ي ف ح م ق ل ا ن و ز خ م](#). December 2021

food exports for two months due to the “recent international developments” in addition to extending pre-existing export bans on legumes, wheat and its by-products, and chicken.<sup>4</sup>

The government also announced that it was working on securing more food items and diversifying their import trading partners. For example, on 8 March, the government [provided](#) the STE with SYP 73 billion to purchase 33,000 tonnes of sugar to be sold through the smart card. Additionally, Amin [stated](#) that work is being done on purchasing 200,000 tonnes of wheat from India and that search for other wheat sources is underway. Moreover, the assistant minister of economy for Foreign Trade Affairs, Bassam Haidar, [stated](#) that the government has opened the door for traders to import wheat either by applying to government tenders or importing directly into the market.

### *Underlying economic problems remain*

While the conflict in Ukraine is the government’s latest scapegoat for the country’s economic hardships, many other causes have contributed to the price increases. First, the government’s subsidy removal decision on 1 February, which targeted business owners and industrialists in general was followed by a 10% increase in prices. Second, the government’s constant subsidy removal for industrialists, such as increasing the price of fuel oil and providing less electricity, has increased the cost of production which is reflected on consumer prices. Third, local sources stated that the government’s 24 February decision to further ration essential items has led to a significant reduction in fuel availability in the market. Since then petrol and diesel prices, in Rural Damascus for example, have increased more than 18%, consequently leading to a surge in transportation and production costs which engenders



### *Percentage increase in food item prices for every one percent depreciation in the Syrian Pound (Source: HAT)*

<sup>4</sup> New food items on the export ban include garlic, potatoes, onions, vegetable ghee, animal ghee, vegetable oil, vegetable butter, eggs, and olive oil. Media sources have also speculated that tea and Yerba Mate are also on the export ban.

price increases. Finally, the Syrian pound has depreciated 6% since 24 February from 3,680 to 3,900 SYP per USD, also contributing to price increases (shown above).

Some of the government's mitigation measures, have contributed to price hikes in the short term while market patrols have failed to force traders to adhere to official price lists. The economic/financial challenges which continue in government-held areas, coupled with the government's limited means to deal with them will likely see prices continue to rise, particularly during Ramadan, when food demand is high.

## Militias and government forces clash in As-Sweida

Local militias and government forces clashed in As-Sweida governorate following the deployment of government military reinforcements last month. Hundreds of fighters and dozens of military vehicles deployed in As-Sweida governorate in mid-February following successive protests and road closures. The government says the soldiers are in As-Sweida to maintain security in the governorate and crack-down on criminality and kidnapping gangs however local sources report that the reinforcements were stationed near government, security, and military buildings and had not cracked down on criminal gangs. Despite the heavy security presence, an employee in the governorate's water institution was reportedly kidnapped on 12 March by unknown gunmen on the Qanawat road after leaving a party.

*Security committee decides to increase security presence*

The governorate's security committee then decided on 10 March to implement new measures the following week to pursue individuals wanted for kidnapping and murder. Government forces set up

temporary checkpoints on roads east of As-Sweida city and in the northeast leading to Qanawat township.<sup>5</sup> The checkpoints were reportedly ordered to run criminal background checks on civilians passing through them. Moreover, fighters manning the checkpoint were directed to treat the civilians well to avoid any conflict. However, local sources reported incidents involving mistreatment of civilians passing through the checkpoints, resulting in heightened tensions and confrontations with local militias.

*Bayraq al-Fahed attacks government forces in Qanawat*

One such incident took place on 17 March on a checkpoint in Qanawat township. State Security fighters chased and physically assaulted a civilian who failed to show his ID card and refused to stop at a checkpoint. The town's local militia, Bayraq al-Fahed, then attacked the checkpoint with small arms fire and RPGs resulting in clashes which lasted for an hour, removing the checkpoint, and wounding two State Security fighters. After attacking the checkpoint, the militiamen proceeded to [evict](#) the National Defense Forces from their makeshift headquarters in Faysal al-Qassem's villa, taking it



*Bayraq al-Fahed checkpoint in Qanawat township on 20 March (Source: Sweida 24).*

<sup>5</sup> Media sources stated that the fighters manning the checkpoints consisted of the reinforcements deployed into the governorate from the governments various security agencies (Military Intelligence, Political Security, State Security, police) and were supported by the NDF.

over. Government forces responded by deploying additional police to its pre-existing positions on both sides of the Qanawat road, prompting community leaders and military officers to intervene in an attempt to de-escalate. However, the confrontations in Qanawat did not cease.

On 19 March, the NDF commander in As-Sweida, Rashid Salloum, was [stopped](#) and beaten by Bayraq al-Fahed fighters at their checkpoint after meeting with Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, a religious and community leader, living in the township. The next day, militiamen [chased](#) a Political Security vehicle into the neighboring Mafaala township after refusing to stop at a checkpoint; three fighters took refuge in a civilian house. They were allowed to leave two hours later after Sheikh al-Hijri intervened. Local sources say the government later opted to dismantle the temporary checkpoints in late March and withdraw its forces from the governorate's roads except for As-Sweida city.

#### *Qouwat Sheikh al-Karama evict government forces from As-Sweida city*

Government forces stationed in the city were also harassed by militias. Qouwat Sheikh al-Karama (QSK), the governorate's prominent militia, deployed in As-Sweida city on 19 March, evicted government patrols and temporary checkpoints from the city with the help of other armed groups. The eviction came after the Syrian government stopped Sheikh Talal Zeineddine while crossing into Syria under the pretext that he is wanted. Sheikh Zeineddine was part of a Lebanese Druze religious delegation sent by Lebanese Druze community leader, Sheikh Dr. Sami Abi al-Mana, to meet with Sheikh al-Hijri in As-Sweida. The eviction, along with the intervention of Druze religious and community leaders in As-Sweida eventually forced the government to release Sheikh Zeineddine, however, media sources [reported](#) that the delegation was forced to return to Lebanon after the government con-

ditioned their entry on presenting a permit from Sheikh Nassereddine al-Gharib, who the government recognizes as the prime Lebanese Druze religious authority.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Clashes between militias and government forces expected*

The clashes which occurred between local militias and government forces were not surprising. As-Sweida residents do not take government transgressions lightly, particularly extortion and mistreatment of residents at its checkpoints. Additionally, society in As-Sweida is particularly sensitive to heightened government presence in the governorate out of fear that forced conscription of its young men may follow suit. Moreover, As-Sweida's quasi-autonomous status and special communal characteristics enables it to overtly oppose government encroachments head-on, unlike other areas under government control.

The reaction of local militias and community leaders following the arrest of Sheikh Zeineddine and later the Lebanese delegation's reported inability to enter Syria attests to the extent in which it is ready and able to pressure the government if it encroaches on Druze communal interests. Indeed, local sourc-



*QSK fighter in As-Sweida city following eviction of government forces (Source: Sweida 24).*

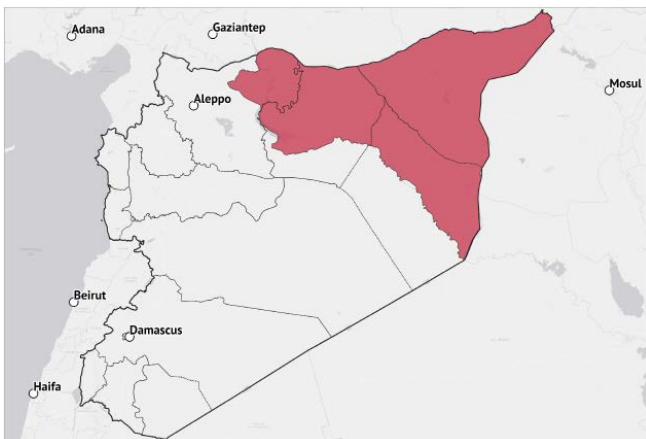
<sup>6</sup> The Syrian government issued a decision on March 2019 which requires Druze Sheikhs who wish to visit Syria to hold a permit from Sheikh Nassereddine al-Gharib, a Druze religious leader backed by the its ally in Lebanon, Talal Arslan.



es stated that more local militias were planning on intervening alongside QSK had Sheikh Zeineddine not been released.

The withdrawal of the government’s temporary checkpoints will likely ease tensions in the governorate given that it reduces the chances of altercations occurring between local militias and government forces. Moreover, it is likely that the Syrian government will be pressured to revoke its March 2019 [decision](#) to limit the movement of Druze Sheikhs between Lebanon and Syria, which Sheikh Abi al-Manna [called](#) “offensive to the dignity of the Druze.”

## Northeast



### Conflict in Ukraine has knock-on effect on Syrian pound, inflation and prices in northeast

A number of protests were held in the northeast against inflation, increased prices, lack of availability of fuel, and ultimately, decreased purchasing power. As in government-held areas, the conflict in Ukraine has had a knock-on effect in northeast Syria, with the instability exacerbating shortages and increasing prices, while reducing affordability – the Syrian pound has also depreciated.

#### Menbij

Item	Price approx. 1 Feb (SYP)	Price, approx. 31 Mar (SYP)	Percentage change
Short-grain rice (kg)	2,500	3,800	52%
Borgol (per bag)	1,800	4,000	122%
Sunflower oil (L)	6,500	12,500	85%

#### Quamishli

Item	Price approx. 1 Feb (SYP)	Price, approx. 31 Mar (SYP)	Percentage change
Short-grain rice (kg)	2,800	3,100	11%
Borgol (per bag)	2,600	2,800	8%
Sunflower oil (L)	6,500	11,000	69%
Sugar (kg)	2,700	3,000	11%

#### Ar Raqqa

Item	Price approx. 1 Feb (SYP)	Price, approx. 31 Mar (SYP)	Percentage change
Short-grain rice (kg)	3,200	3,500	9%
Borgol (per bag)	1,600	3,500	119%
Sunflower oil (liter)	6,700	11,000	64%
Sugar (kg)	3,500	4,500	28%

As of 31 March, the pound reached around 3,865 SYP per USD in the northeast, and throughout the month contributed to the increase in prices of basic goods and commodities. In some places, like Quamishli town, media [reports](#) indicated that some shops had to close due to an inability to keep up with the rapidly depreciating currency, and low purchasing power.

### *Fuel shortages*

Further, across all areas of the northeast, civilians struggled to secure fuel for personal use, including drivers for their vehicles, and farmers for their agriculture work. In Menbij and Quamishli, local sources reported on civilians struggling to secure fuel for their vehicles, where in Quamishli for four days straight from 8 March, gas stations were closed. In Menbij, civilians were forced to buy more expensive black-market fuel sold in homes or on the side of the road. Gas cylinders are also hard to come by, as sources in Menbij indicate the price has increased 10,000 SYP per cylinder in a matter of days this past week, from 65,000 SYP to 75,000 SYP. Elsewhere, civilians in eastern Deir-ez-Zor, including in Namlieh, Basira, Al Azba and Al-Jurdi, as well as southern Al-Hasakeh including the main road between Shaddadi and Dushaisha, [reportedly](#) burned tyres and blocked roads as they called for fuel provision.

## Teachers strike against depreciating salaries, poor conditions

Due to the depreciation of the Syrian pound, teachers in eastern and western Deir-ez-Zor announced an open strike as they protested against poor wages, and called for their salaries to be linked to the pound's black market rate.

Protests took place in multiple areas, including the towns of Hajin, Jurdi, Saawa, Sweidan Jazira, Jdid Ekeidat, KISR, Zaghira, Jazra, Al-Izba, Tayyana, Shaafa, and Maizla in Administration-held Deir-ez-Zor. Teachers in Aricha, Abou Hamda, Shadda-

di and Markada in southern Al-Hasakeh also went on strike with similar demands. In Menbij and Ar-Raqqa, teachers struck for one day on 28 March, and in Menbij, this mostly included schools outside the city.

The teachers' demands include improved living conditions and wages in light of the depreciation of the Syrian pound. Teachers are also calling on the Autonomous Administration to improve its services to the education sector, and to address primary issues behind the shortages and migration of teachers; these include increased spending on classroom materials, as well as hiring counselors to address students' needs. Teachers are also demanding transportation compensation, equalizing teachers' salaries in all areas under the Administration, introducing Islamic education into the school curricula, and calling on the teachers' syndicate to negotiate increased health benefits.

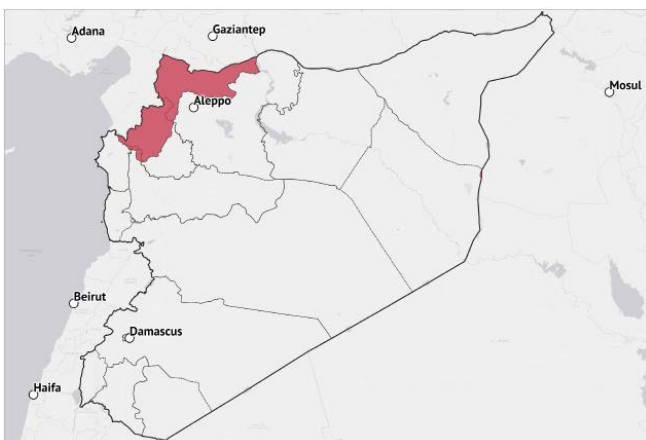
According to local sources, teachers in Al-Hasakeh, Administration-held Deir-ez-Zor, and Menbij, make somewhere between 250,000–280,000 SYP per month, and those with higher education can make up to 400,000 SYP. In the northeast, REACH data shows that the cost of a survival minimum expenditure basket, or SMEB, is 477,898 SYP, which means it would take teachers about two months of work to afford basic food and NFI items for a month.



*Protestors in Jurdi. (Source: Jurdi Facebook page)*

Spokesperson for the Autonomous Administration, Luqman Ahmi, [stated](#) that amid the economic crisis, the northeast must “achieve self-sufficiency”, “rely on [its] production of basic materials”, and support the agriculture sector in the northeast. Ahmi added that the current difficulties will be used as an “economic war” against the Autonomous Administration. This is not the first time the Administration has faced local discontent at a lack of provision of basic services and the cost of goods, particularly in Arab-majority Deir-ez-Zor. Most notably, Administration-held areas have recently suffered from wheat shortages because of a low wheat production season in 2021. The Administration previously mentioned it had struck a deal with Russia to import wheat, however there is as yet no evidence to show whether trade has taken place.

## Northwest



### Storms, snow and freezing temperatures hit northwest

Northwest Syria was affected by a severe storm that was accompanied by rain, snowfall, and a drop in temperatures during the first half of March, which damaged IDP camps. The rains formed torrents that submerged large parts of the camps and turned them into swamps, especially in temporary encampments near the Syrian–Turkish border.

The Response Coordination Group counted the damage in the first week, where more than 435 tents and more than 10,000 IDPs were affected in more than 58 camps within the areas of Sheikh Bahr, Kafr Yahmoul, Zardana, Harbnoush, Atma, Darkush, Barisha, Adwan, Salwa, Qah and the camps of the northern countryside of Aleppo, while 44 camps were reportedly damaged during the second week.

The adverse weather conditions increased civilians’ need for alternative heating materials used as substitutes for fuel. Moreover the increase in demand coincided with a severe shortage of these materials in Idleb and its countryside, while in Dana, Deir Hassan, Kafrlosin and Sarmada, the materials were sold out or unavailable. The shortage in alternative heating materials and their high prices were caused by an increase in demand, the decline in Turkish imports through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, high costs of transportation, storage and taxes, and the Turkish lira’s instability against the US dollar. The Wataad Petroleum company also raised the price of imported petrol in March by approximately 21% to \$1.162 per liter. It also raised the price of gas cylinders by 5% to \$12.63 per canister, while the remaining fuel types remained at the same price. The company stated that fuel prices increased due to the increase in international prices caused by the Russian–Ukrainian conflict.

*Temporary shelters burned and IDPs injured in attempt to keep warm*

The high price and shortage of basic and good heating materials can push civilians to use unhealthy and unsafe alternative heating materials such as plastic, coal and locally refined fuel, because their prices are cheaper compared to wood and diesel. The use of these materials has caused fires in the camps, resulting in a number of injuries. For example, eight people, including women and children, were recently injured suffering from burns of various degrees after a number of tents in camps north of Idleb and northern Aleppo caught fire. Some of these fires have also resulted in significant material

damages. Additionally, heating with these materials in rooms and tents without proper ventilation can be fatal, while malfunctioning heating devices may release toxic fumes, threatening the lives of residents.

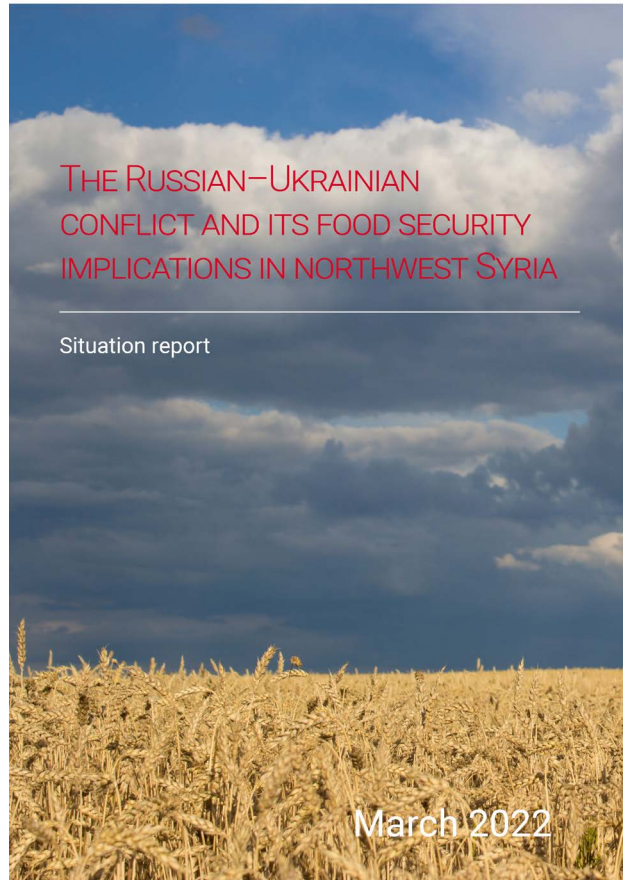
## New increase in electricity prices in northern Aleppo

On 22 March, the Ak Energy company which supplies and distributes electricity in northern Aleppo announced a rise in the price of electricity. The company set the price of one kilowatt for domestic subscription at 2.45 TRY, and 3.20 TRY per kilowatt for commercial and industrial subscriptions. Demonstrations against the increase in electricity prices have been regular in northern Aleppo since December 2021, while Ak Energy continues to hike up subscriptions. The protests were initially successful, with fighters from the Northern Storm Brigade of the Syrian National Army closed down the company's operations in Azaz – following negotiations with the Azaz local council, it was agreed prices would be capped at 1.85 TRY per kilowatt for domestic consumption, and 3 TRY for commercial and industrial subscriptions. Ak Energy agreed to evacuate and hand over operations to the council in the event of non-compliance with the agreement.

Despite the agreement, one week after the company decided to raise prices, local councils in northern Aleppo have still not commented, raising questions about their ability to force the company to abide by the terms. It is expected that the protests and demonstrations against the decision will return if prices remain at the current level. Residents and IDPs in Afrin met and agreed to form a committee to follow up with the electricity company, the local council and all concerned parties. The committee also demanded people turn off the lights in all homes and shops in Afrin from 21:00–22:00 for four days between 28 and 31 March, they also called for a demonstration on 1 April, threatening to escalate if there was no response.



## March publications...



The Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its food security implications in northwest Syria

*As the Russian-Ukrainian conflict continues, secondary impacts on food security and energy supplies are being felt globally. Turkey's reliance on both Russian and Ukrainian products is expected to have a knock-on effect in northwest Syria, which is itself highly dependent on Turkish imports.*

## CONTACT

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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.

