

SYRIA YEAR IN REVIEW 2022



January 2023

Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
<hr/>	
Security	3
Economy	4
Politics	5
Humanitarian	6
ECONOMIC TRENDS	9
<hr/>	
Damascus struggles with economic decline	9
Russian–Ukrainian conflict disrupts wheat supply	12
Administration policymaking sparks fuel process	13
POLITICAL TRENDS	16
<hr/>	
Assad grants amnesty for terrorist charges	16
Damascus extends diplomatic relations	17
Government settlement procedures fall flat	19
Local elections fail to decentralize government	22
SECURITY TRENDS	25
<hr/>	
Local militia challenge armed gangs in As-Sweida	25
Infighting between opposition armed groups	26
ISIS resurgence and counter-terrorism operations	27
Turkey attacks northern Syria	29
HUMANITARIAN TRENDS	32
<hr/>	
Security council extends cross-border aid	32
Whole of Syria responds to cholera outbreak	33
<i>Damascus</i>	33
<i>Syrian Salvation and Syrian Interim Governments</i>	34
<i>Autonomous Administration</i>	35
Teachers protest for education reform	35
<i>Northern Aleppo</i>	35
<i>Idleb</i>	36
<i>Autonomous Administration</i>	37
Fuel shortages leave families cold	38

INTRODUCTION

Across all hubs and zones of control, conditions in Syria continued to decline throughout 2022, with several noteworthy developments taking place. This year-in review offers insight into a selection of key themes relevant to donor-funded response actors. The review does not intend to be exhaustive by covering every event, dynamic, or development, but rather has prioritized key trends that the HAT has assessed to have had a profound impact on the Syrian crisis and the trajectory of the conflict. The review is organized based on economic, political, security, and humanitarian themes, offering insights, reflections, and follow-ups to the crucial developments HAT has covered previously, many of which shaped the past year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Security

The frontlines in Syria remained largely stagnant this year as no major offensives and ground incursions took place. However, notable security developments, localized within each zone of control did take place, while Turkey conducted airstrikes and bombardment against the SDF in Syria, and threatened to launch a ground offensive.

In Syrian government-held areas, the most significant security developments largely took place in the quasi-autonomous As-Sweida governorate. There, local militias decided to put an end to the reign of terror by armed groups and gangs affiliated with the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). The militias attacked the notorious Qouwat al-Fajr headquarters in Atil township (As-Sweida subdistrict) – Qouwat al-Fajr had angered many by targeting some of the governorate’s most influential families. The clashes resulted in the closure of the As-Sweida–Damascus highway for almost two days and were followed by a crackdown on the remaining MID-affiliated militias located in Qanawat, Salkhad, and As-Sweida city.

In ongoing developments in the northeast, the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) and Syrian government forces continue to conduct counter-ISIS operations, throughout the governorates of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and the Syrian Badia. The SDF and the International Coalition conducted joint



Clashes in As-Sweida between local militia and government-affiliated armed groups.

operations targeting ISIS members, leaders, and explosives manufacturers throughout 2022, particularly following an attempt made by ISIS members to break out of Ghweiran prison; it took the SDF weeks to successfully defeat ISIS combatants in and around the prison and later capture those who managed to flee. Syrian government forces, with the assistance of the Russian air force, conducted several airstrikes and combing operations in government-held Deir-ez-Zor to prevent ISIS from controlling the major roads passing through the governorate; ISIS temporarily took control of major roads connected to the Al-Ward oil field.

Turkey continued to threaten the SDF, accusing the US-led Coalition-supported armed umbrella of affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),

which it classifies as a terrorist group. On 2 February, Turkish forces launched operation Winter Eagle in northern Syria and Iraq; the operation consisted of airstrikes against targeted ammunition warehouses, hideouts, military posts and headquarters. Turkish media would later call the operation a “success.” Turkey then launched operation Claw Sword on 20 November following a deadly bombing in Istanbul, for which the PKK was blamed. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan renewed threats of establishing a 30km buffer zone along the Turkish–Syrian border, identifying Ain Al Arab (Kobani) as his next target. The ground invasion never materialized, likely as a strategic calculation by Turkey, given the high degree of pressure to abstain from global powers such as Russia and the US. Claw Sword, in the end, manifested as widespread aerial bombardments which would cripple the Autonomous Administration’s fuel production and service provision for weeks into winter 2022. Erdogan, up for reelection in May 2023, continues to threaten a ground offensive to secure the border area.

In the northwest, major incidents revolved around intra-opposition clashes that involved Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah against Ahrar al-Sham and the Al-Hamzah Division. Many observers, including HAT, viewed Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah attacks on Ahrar al-Sham in June as political infighting and disagreement over allegiances within the Syrian National Army. The clashes prompted Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to intervene alongside Ahrar al-Sham (a longtime rival that it had previously defeated), and took control over several villages in Afrin subdistrict. More violent clashes took place later in October when Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah attacked the Al-Hamzah Division, again prompting HTS to intervene; in this instance, clashes took place on a larger scale, enabling them to reach the outskirts of Azaz city. In both cases, Turkish mediation of the dispute led to a ceasefire among armed actors, though HTS would later withdraw.

Economy



Taxi drivers push their cars to save fuel while queuing for fuel stations in Damascus, amid shortages affecting the whole country.

The overall economic situation in Syria deteriorated to unprecedented levels. The Syrian pound plummeted by 91% in total in 2022, surpassing the 7,000 SYP per USD mark for the first time. Household purchasing power and economic productivity has dramatically collapsed, as markets consequently experienced several shocks throughout the year; chronic shortages of certain food items in addition to skyrocketing prices have created widespread hardship and reduced market activity. Moreover, the government has implemented more austerity measures to attempt to balance its budget, an indication that the Central Bank’s foreign currency reserves are low. The Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance have both attempted to stabilize the black-market exchange rate through several means; the official exchange rates have

shifted upwards several times in 2022, while the government sold more debt and opened the opportunity for individuals to purchase treasury bonds, previously exclusive to Syrian banks and exchange companies. Additionally, the Central Bank and security agencies have implemented measures to siphon more foreign currency out of the market; however, these measures have only served to further constrain the economy and its foreign currency-generating sectors.

A shift in geopolitically-sensitive supply chains, particularly influenced by the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, has converged with Syria’s pre-existing problems and further exacerbated the country’s economic woes. The fallout from the eastern European conflict, as well as growing global inflation and disruptions

in global supply chains, has resulted in price increases in Syrian and Turkish markets. Moreover, the increasing sanctions and wartime expenditure of Russia, the Syrian government's primary patron, have further restricted the government's access to foreign currency.

Syria's wheat and fuel shortages have also intensified in 2022. The increase in global oil and wheat prices, in part due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, has made it more difficult for the Syrian government to purchase either commodity. Russian wheat exporting companies have increased prices while freight shipping costs (including shipping insurance) have made it nearly impossible for the government to import wheat without external credit or assistance. Reports throughout 2022 emerged of shipments of stolen Ukrainian wheat making their way to Syria.

In government-held areas, officials blamed insufficient oil imports and disrupted supply lines from the Autonomous Administration for oil shortages. Iran, the government's main oil supplier, is reportedly now demanding that the government pay for its oil upfront instead of using credit; the country has been experiencing economic turmoil with its own currency falling to an all-time low in December. Having to pay up-front is likely to further complicate oil procurement and cause more fuel shortages into 2023.

In Autonomous Administration-held areas, the threat of a Turkish offensive forced the Administration to redirect its fuel supplies to both the SDF and government military forces, initially exacerbating the shortage. The Turkish bombardment, part of operation Claw Sword then damaged several oil production facilities, decreasing domestic fuel production.

Politics

There were several national and regional political developments in 2022 consisting of conciliatory steps by the government towards the international community, continued representation of the Baath party on the local administration level, and moves towards the Syrian government's regional reintegration. On a national level, Bashar al-Assad issued a general amnesty in April for citizens tried by the counter-terrorism court – except for 'acts of terror' and those which led to the death of a person. While there was optimism surrounding the president's amnesty, which government officials referred to as "historic" and a "national reconciliation," it turned out to be a disappointment. The lack of coordination between government agencies, bureaucratic hurdles, and suspected insincerity in its implementation impeded its effectiveness, leading to the release of a few hundred people only.

Local Administration Elections took place in government-held areas in September amid a decline in governance and socioeconomic circumstances. Government officials described the elections as a transition from central governance to local administration units. The elections had 59,498 approved candidates (25,000 compared to the 2018 elections) who competed for over 19,086 seats for local administrative units (governorate councils, city councils, and municipalities) across all governorates, including government-held Idleb. While government officials said that the high number of candidates was an indicator of local commitment to the democratic process, widespread interference and influence on the electoral process to manipulate election results were evident. Election results were announced between 20 and 22 September; the Baath-supported electoral lists secured significant victories in Idleb, Aleppo, and As-Sweida governorates. They were met with apathy by the majority of the population.

The Syrian government continued settlement procedures — agreements conducted between the Syrian government and local communities — in 2022. Settlement centers were opened in government-held Deir-ez-Zor, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and As-Sweida governorates. The settlements were largely unsuccessful in attracting many listed civilians, likely due to the lack of trust in the government, and fear of exposure to arrest (or even assassination). The settlement centers largely only managed to attract members of pro-government and Iranian-backed armed groups who sought to clear their records.

On a regional level, the Syrian government has slowly continued its rapprochement with Arab countries in the face of US objections and has made progress in reopening its relationship with Turkey. Syrian–UAE relations continued to improve with Assad visiting the UAE in March, his first visit to an Arab country since 2011. UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed, in turn, visited Damascus in January to meet with Assad to continue discussing ways to enhance bilateral relations. The US expressed its “profound disappointment” in the UAE’s improved relations, stressing that it does not support efforts to rehabilitate Assad or his government in Damascus. For its part, Algeria, host of the Arab League summit this year in November, led an initiative to include Syrian officials but in the end, was unable to do so.

A potential warming of Turkish–Syrian relations in late 2022, has led to observers unsure over the future of north and northwest Syria, particularly in relation to the remaining armed actors, political groups, and communities opposed to the Syrian government – not to mention the large number of IDPs in the area, many of whom were subjected to localized reconciliation agreements over the past six years. Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, spoke of the “need to bring the opposition and regime together for reconciliation somehow”, and confirmed that both countries’ intelligence agencies were holding meetings. Cavusoglu and the Turkish government’s calls for a rapprochement were met with large protests in opposition-held areas and condemnatory statements by opposition figures, including the leader of HTS, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Despite the protests, overt progress towards rapprochement culminated in a trilateral meeting between the Russian, Turkish and Syrian defense ministers and intelligence chiefs in Moscow on 28 December.

Humanitarian

The humanitarian situation in Syria continued to deteriorate with the the price of essential items, including heating, continuing to increase and a cholera outbreak threatening to turn into a public health crisis. The potential collapse of a fragile cross border resolution looms in the background, threatening to cut off northwest Syria from much-needed humanitarian aid.

The cross-border aid resolution was extended twice in 2022, the first in January when the UN Security Council extended the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for aid deliveries for six months, as part of Resolution 2585 (agreed in July 2021). The second resolution was agreed by the Security Council in July with the adoption of Resolution 2642 (expiring 10 January 2023) – the July resolution this time called for a separate agreement in January 2023, rather than an extension of the current resolution as had been the case the previous year. The extension came after the UNSC agreed on the Russian requirements which included increased cross-line aid delivery, and encouraged the convening of a group for informal interactive dialogue every two months to regularly review the implementation of the resolution and the progress in early recovery projects.

Since 2021, and the adoption of resolutions 2585 and 2642 (which include requirements for cross-line aid delivery, controlled by Damascus, into Idlib), only 10 aid convoys (153 trucks) entered Idlib from government-held areas in Aleppo. In 2022, only 82 aid trucks entered through the cross-line mechanism, compared to 8,390 aid trucks through the cross-border mechanism, which constitute less than 1% of the total humanitarian aid delivered to the northwest. The Bab al-Hawa border crossing is the only remaining international crossing through which UN aid is allowed to enter northwest Syria, home to more than 4 million Syrians, including 2.8 million IDPs. Households in northwest Syria continue to experience difficult humanitarian conditions amid the economic crisis, exacerbated by Turkey’s economic issues in 2022 – Turkey’s annualized inflation reached close to 85% in November 2022. At least 2.8 million people, including 65% women and children, depend on aid provided by the current UN-led cross-border response to meet their basic needs every month through the cross-border delivery mechanism.

Syria experienced a nationwide cholera outbreak starting mid-September 2022, the first seen since 2009. The outbreak was caused by several factors: The country's water infrastructure has been heavily damaged following a decade of conflict, hindering the local population's access to clean water. Groundwater levels, particularly in the Euphrates river valley and its tributaries, which provides irrigation, hydroelectric power and water to much of the northeast, have fallen to dangerously low levels, forming polluted swamps and restricting access to potable water. Drought has also hit northern Syria, leaving farmers desperate to find alternative means to irrigate crops – the practice of using wastewater (often contaminated with sewage), became widespread, further contaminating crops. Additionally, water stress in northeast Syria was exacerbated by Turkey's alleged disruption of water supply to Alouk water station, which serves more than 460,000 in Al-Hasakeh governorate. Inconsistent water availability across Syria, particularly in the northeast, forced the local population to rely on water trucks, which are often unregulated, with water companies accused of selling contaminated water from the Euphrates and boreholes with little to no regulation or quality control. In IDP camps in the northwest, their proximity to open sewage sites was also a factor. The outbreak led the Syrian government and de-facto administrations across the country to implement strict measures, with some international support, to prevent the outbreak from spreading further.

The education sectors in the northeast and northwest faced significant disruptions, with teachers striking for more pay, better working conditions, and against disagreements over governing bodies and the curriculum. In the northwest, districts in Turkey oversee education in SIG-controlled areas, while in Idleb, teachers held strikes throughout the year, many having worked unpaid for long periods. Moreover, the Autonomous Administration closed and fined schools teaching the Syrian government's internationally recognized curriculum, in an attempt to introduce its own throughout its areas.

With winter approaching, families throughout Syria faced challenges of poor government distribution of diesel for heating, and soaring fuel prices on the black market. Locals in government-held areas are reliant, to a large extent, on government subsidies and deliveries of fuel for heating during the winter. The government's subsidy allocation system, part of state support for the poorest communities, was heavily cut in 2022; citizens' fuel allocations in winter were either cut completely, or reduced. The Ministry of Fuel and Mineral resources also struggled to keep up with the demand for oil deliveries. Consumers and households turned to alternative methods to heat their homes, with firewood the most economical and widely available, particularly in forested areas. Also used as fuel were cypress cones, olive cakes, and animal manure, and unconventional sources such as nutshells, alcohol-based fuels, or sometimes dangerous alternatives like waste and plastic. Deforestation and illicit logging activities have led to a growing illegal economy, and contributed to climatic concerns, related to soil erosion and land degradation – without proper measures in place to protect forests, these issues could escalate.



Teachers held strikes throughout the northwest, calling for improved conditions, and to be paid appropriately (or at all) for their work

The background of the slide features a dark blue gradient with a silhouette of a city skyline. The skyline includes various architectural elements such as domes, minarets, and a central archway. In the foreground, on the left side, there is a silhouette of a person riding a horse. The word "Economy" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font, partially overlapping the silhouette of the city.

Economy

- ◇ Damascus struggles with economic decline
- ◇ Russian–Ukrainian conflict disrupts wheat supply
- ◇ Administration policymaking sparks fuel protests

ECONOMIC TRENDS

Damascus struggles with economic decline

The Syrian economy deteriorated to unprecedented levels in 2022, as the government faced numerous converging economic and geopolitical challenges. Global economic disruptions have had a knock-on effect on prices and supply chains; the government's foreign currency reserves have seemingly continued to deplete, the Syrian pound has depreciated more than 71% this year alone, and the government has found itself unable to provide sufficient services or commodities to the public. There are several reasons for these economic and financial setbacks, some as a result of shocks to the international economy, and others as a result of problematic domestic policymaking by the government and the Central Bank.

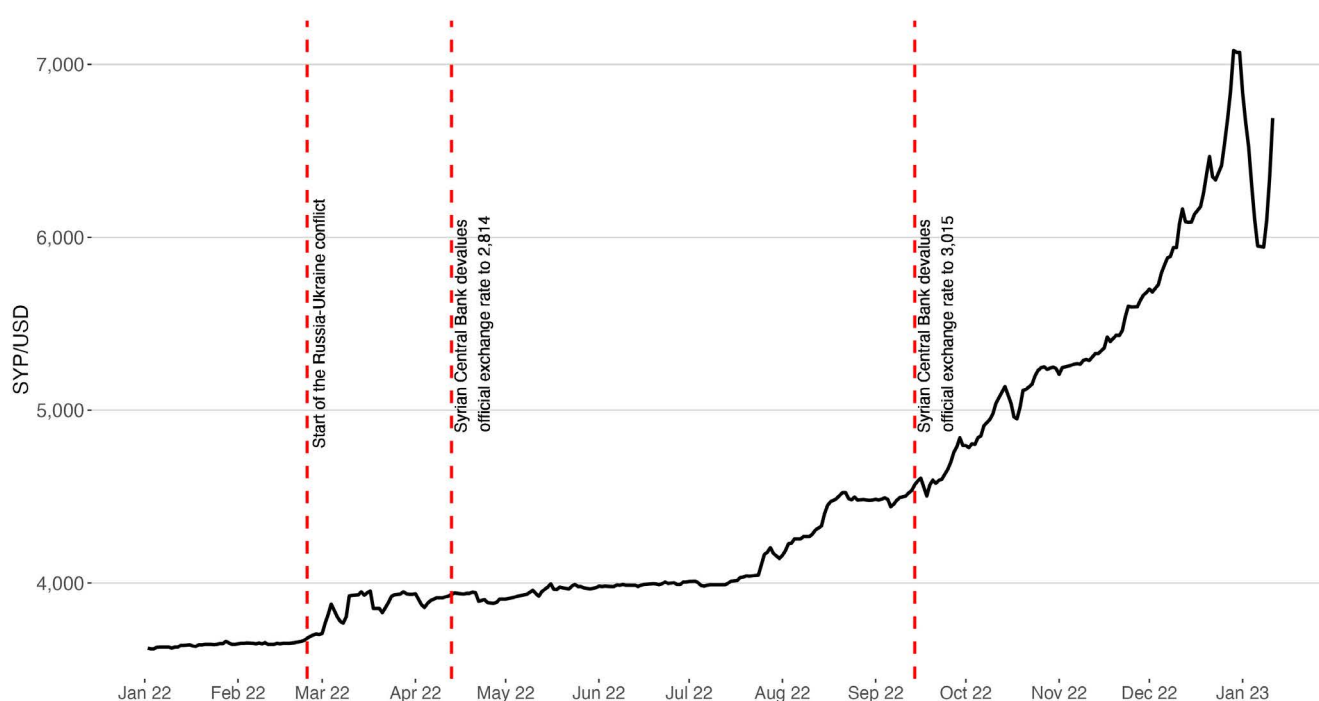


Figure 1: Syrian pound's black-market depreciation throughout 2022

The Russian–Ukrainian conflict has hurt the global commodity markets, resulting in a knock-on effect on the economy and markets in government-held areas. Twenty days after the start of the eastern European conflict, the price of basic food items increased up to 73% in government-held areas. Price increases were coupled with supply shortages in some staple food items, such as sunflower oil and rice (wheat shortages were ongoing at the time), which was later [attributed](#) both to the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and traders hoarding goods to be able to sell at higher prices when demand outstripped supply. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection would note on 26 March that the sudden price increases resulted in a marked drop in market activity, with citizens unable to afford many food items, and families purchasing only half of the food items they needed.

Additionally, the removal of several Russian banks from SWIFT (a component of the global payments system) has also hurt the Syrian economy. Acting as a channel to access global financial and banking markets, the government has [accounts](#) in Russian banks that use SWIFT to conduct international financial transactions, and possibly as a source of foreign currency. The government has seemingly run danger-

ously low on foreign currency reserves, inhibiting its ability to trade, and increasing its balance of payments deficit. The removal of Russian banks from SWIFT further hampered the government's access to foreign currency, already reduced following the collapse of the Lebanese banking sector in 2019. Finally, the inflow of remittances, which are an important source of foreign currency within Syria, has reduced. This has been attributed to global economic stagflation resulting from the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, economic mismanagement during COVID-19, interruptions to payment systems and other geopolitical disturbances.

There have been several actions taken by the government which indicate difficulties balancing the budget. To reduce government expenditure, the government continued its subsidy removal policy, excluding an additional ten employment sectors from the subsidy program. The government also continued increasing the price of subsidized items (largely imports); official fuel prices were [increased](#) up to 23%, while fertilizer prices [increased](#) up to 92%. The government has been selling SYP-denominated treasury bonds to raise money to finance its budget deficit; treasury bonds financed 29% of its deficit in 2021 and increased to 31% during the first eight months of 2022. Seeing that both the purchase rate and the number of banks participating in treasury bond bids are decreasing, the government decided to [allow individuals to purchase treasury bonds](#) as a form of [investment](#).

Table 1. Government treasury bond sales since 2020

Date	Purchase rate	Banks involved	Bid value (SYP)	Bid value (USD)
3 February 2020	99%	7/17	150bn	145m
10 August 2020	100%	5/17	150bn	72m
15 November 2020	87%	8/17	116bn	40m
31 January 2022	79%	6/17	188bn	62m
8 August 2022	85%	8/17	300bn	70m
10 October 2022	83%	5/17	100bn	20m

The floundering economy has prompted the government to implement increasingly restrictive economic policies. Local sources continued to report traders and shop owners across government-held areas being subjected to raids conducted by customs officers and security agencies. These raids were part of a law preventing illicit foreign currency trading from unofficial sources. During the raids, traders often had their financial and accounting documents, sometimes even security camera recordings, confiscated. If foreign currency was found, the owners were fined up to millions of pounds, their shop forcibly closed, and they were potentially jailed under [law 54/2013](#) and [law 3/2020](#). Moreover, the government has reportedly implemented policies with the intent of generating foreign currency revenues. Media sources stated that the Central Bank issued a decision requiring livestock exporters, particularly those exporting male goats, to sell 50% of the generated foreign currency to the government at the official exchange rate; the official exchange rate is currently lower than the black market rate by more than 50%, resulting in significant revenue loss for the exporters. Additionally, many business owners have complained of “illogical taxes” being imposed by the Syrian government. For example, hotels have also been subjected to a ‘hospitality tax’ where they are taxed for any free food or drink which they offer to guests.

The lack of foreign currency reserves has prevented the Central Bank from successfully stabilizing the Syrian pound: The pound has depreciated by more than 91% this year on the black market, surpassing the 7,000 SYP per USD mark for the first time; the Central Bank has had to devalue the pound – which has

Table 2. Price change of basic food items in Rural Damascus between February and September (Source: HAT Syria)

Item	Price in February (SYP)	Price in September (SYP)	Percentage change
Bulgur (1kg)	3600	9500	164%
Sugar (1kg)	3400	5500	62%
Rice (1kg)	3800	6000	58%
Beef (1kg)	22000	30000	36%
Cooking oil (1L)	9200	14000	52%

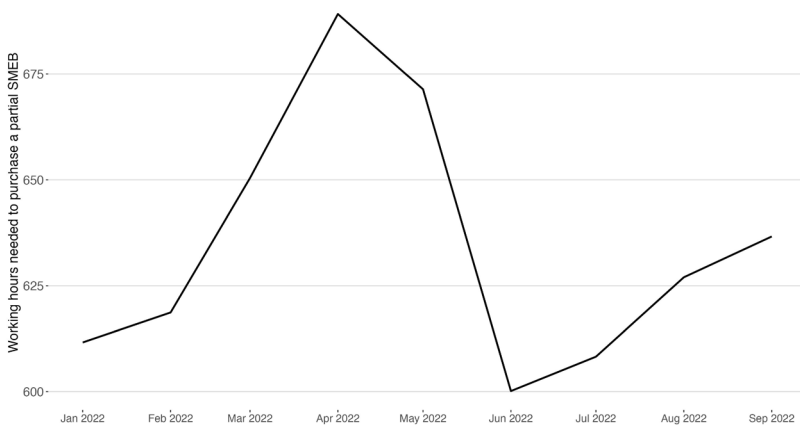


Figure 2. Affordability in Syrian government-held areas, January and September 2022 (Source, HAT Syria).

no longer be possible, increasing the price of oil to \$70 per barrel (from around \$30). Bassam Tomeh, Syrian minister of petroleum, [stated](#) in early December that Iranian oil imports have been insufficient and that the government has had to rely on its reserves.

Local sources also noted that fuel supply from the Autonomous Administration began to dwindle in early November, with disruptions caused by the [Turkish operation Claw Sword](#) between 20 and 26 November which significantly hampered oil and gas production in the northeast. The shortages have had a profound effect on service provision; electricity blackouts have [exceeded](#) 22 hours per day, with the Syrian Telecommunications company reporting a deterioration of its infrastructure amid difficulty purchasing fuel for generators. Local sources also noted that private bakeries in Damascus city have stopped operating due to insufficient diesel while public bakeries operated at reduced capacity. Fuel allocations for all types of public transport (which have been required to install GPS devices to monitor mileage) were reduced, most concerningly for ambulances, which only received 60% of previous levels.

multiple exchange rates¹ – three times in response; the bank rate ([used](#) for private sector bank transactions including imports and exports), for example, was adjusted to 2,814 SYP per USD in April, 3,015 per USD later in September, and 4,522 SYP per USD in January 2023. The pound's devaluation is generally an indirect admission that the economy has deteriorated and the measure is used to try to close the gap in a country's balance of payments. However, both the depreciation and devaluation have contributed to price increases and a reduction in affordability seen throughout government-held areas. (Shown in Table 2 and Figure 2).

Damascus is also struggling to provide adequate services throughout the governorates. The government has faced continuous fuel shortages, struggling to procure fuel from its two main sources: Oil fields controlled by the Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria, [and Iran](#). Iran's own economic problems have meant it will no longer be extending a credit line to Syria, while fuel imports, although they did not decrease in late 2022, were not increased to reach demand. In early 2023, Iran announced that cheap oil imports to Syria would no

¹ In January 2023, the Central Bank raised the SYP:USD exchange rate, including the official rate (used for state budgeting and public sector transactions), bank rate (used for private sector bank transactions including imports and exports), military exemption rate, and the price of remittances. There have been no indications that the rate specified for the UN, which stands at 3,000 SYP, has been adjusted accordingly. The black market rate has decreased marginally from 6,900 to 6,550 SYP to the dollar.

As a result, the government's challenges continue to mount; without a reliable, cheap source of fuel from Iran, and disruptions in the supply chain in the northeast, fuel shortages look likely to continue. Wheat imports have also been unstable, as they have been on a global scale with the fallout from the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. With low foreign currency reserves, the Central Bank is likely to struggle to afford imports should global prices increase (as they have with Iranian fuel). The lack of reserves and access to foreign currency have made the government both economically and financially vulnerable, pushing it to implement increasingly economically restrictive policies against traders and businesses to siphon as much foreign currency from the national economy as possible. This strategy, however, is likely to backfire in the long run as the government is restricting the economic activity of potential foreign currency generating sectors in exchange for time; such a policy is likely to discourage investment. Reductions in government spending, through subsidy removals and reduced services, will also impact growth in the long term, as citizens have less spare cash to spend in markets, reducing demand, and eventually productivity.

Russian–Ukrainian conflict disrupts wheat supply

Since the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, concerns were raised about potential wheat disruptions and shortages in Syrian government-held areas and northwest Syria. Limited foreign currency [reserves](#) meant finding a new ally to import wheat would prove difficult for Damascus, while there were concerns related to Russia's willingness to comply with the previous wheat import contracts; sanctions were also allegedly hindering the [delivery](#) of wheat shipments from other suppliers, such as Romania. The Syrian government implemented [restrictions](#) on the distribution of essential commodities (including wheat and fuel) and temporarily [halted](#) exports to prevent further depletion of its foreign currency reserves. At the same time, media sources indicated that the Ukrainian Embassy in Beirut [accused](#) Russia of shipping “stolen” Ukrainian wheat to the Syrian government as well as bread smuggling operations that continued to take place from Lebanon to Syria “[on a massive scale](#).”

Northwest Syria's reliance on wheat imports from Turkey, which [imports](#) 78% of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia, means that wheat shortages in Turkey could have had a detrimental impact on food security in northwest Syria. Additionally, Turkey's economic and financial instability, a [decline](#) in affordability of essential commodities at the domestic level, and currency depreciation of its own threatened its ability to import wheat, having a direct impact on food security in northwest Syria. To curb the negative implications of the conflict on Turkey's food security, Erdogan [signed](#) the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July, to facilitate wheat exports from besieged Ukrainian areas through “safe corridors” in the Black Sea. This was to have a positive impact on wheat availability in northwest Syria, while addressing Turkey's domestic food security needs and economic concerns.

Domestic wheat production across Syria has declined, primarily due to financial difficulties hindering access to agricultural production inputs, water stress, and institutional mismanagement. In Syrian government-held areas, wheat cultivation areas [decreased](#) from 1.5 million hectares in 2021 to 1.2 million hectares in 2022. Despite government [claims](#) related to wheat sufficiency and the continuation of wheat imports, media sources [indicated](#) that wheat and flour reserves were scarce, [attributed](#) to the high shipping costs amid a continuous decline in Syrian government's foreign currency reserves and the Syrian pound's depreciation. In efforts to encourage local production, the Syrian government and its affiliated institutions announced that farmers would be [provided](#) with subsidized agricultural diesel and electricity through dedicated electricity lines, and that the wheat purchasing price would be [increased](#) to cover the costs of cultivation, harvesting and transportation of crops. It is unclear whether these measures were implemented and, if so, what positive impact they had; farmers [continued](#) to struggle to maintain their livelihoods due to unaffordable costs of production and delays in the delivery of agricultural inputs, such as diesel, critical for operating irrigation pumps.

The adverse impact of increased production costs was seen in northwest Syria as well, where local production covered only a fraction of the local needs. The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) largely [rely](#) on Turkey for securing its domestic wheat and flour needs. Despite the efforts of the SIG and SSG to [support](#) local agricultural production through their institutions and grain establishments, and to provide necessary agricultural inputs, insufficient levels of wheat production continues to threaten the region's food security.

Drought constitutes a major challenge faced by Syria's northeast, where [reduced](#) rainfall led to a decline in local wheat production and a shortfall in quantities needed to meet local demand. Media sources [indicated](#) that farmers were hesitant to cultivate their lands, as water scarcity in previous seasons has increased the acreage of non-arable land once used for food production. The co-chair of the Autonomous Administration's Agriculture and Irrigation Committee [noted](#) that the unstable security situation and climatic factors have forced many farmers to abandon their agricultural lands. While the Autonomous Administration [facilitated](#) the distribution of wheat seeds and diesel, farmers have raised [concerns](#) regarding the complex processes to access subsidized diesel, seeds, and fertilizers, which often lead to delays in the delivery of critical agricultural inputs.

Competition to buy wheat from farmers [increased](#) at the beginning of the harvest season between the Syrian government, Autonomous Administration, SIG, and the SSG, with all governing bodies setting wheat purchase [prices](#) at varying rates; naturally, non-uniform prices typically result in cross-line smuggling by opportunistic actors. To combat this, punitive measures were implemented by governing actors to ensure the delivery of locally produced crops to grain centers in each region and to prevent smuggling toward other zones of control. For instance, Syrian government forces [arrested](#) farmers who failed to deliver all their crops to its grain center. The Autonomous Administration threatened to revoke farming licenses in case farmers fail to deliver their crops to its grain centers. Media sources indicated that wheat smuggling operations have been carried out in [SSG](#) and [SIG](#)-controlled areas, primarily towards Syrian government-held areas due to price differences. Additionally, traders are allegedly affiliated with armed factions of the SNA, who facilitate smuggling within Syrian territory and to [Turkey](#).

Administration policymaking sparks fuel process

The price of petrol and gas canisters [increased](#) in October, further exacerbating the needs of the agricultural sector and households.² Inaccessibility and unavailability of sufficient quantities of diesel have also [led](#) to the suspension of electricity supply in residential neighborhoods and the closure of factories and shops, in addition to sparking popular [protests](#) against deteriorating living conditions. These changes coincided with the [decision](#) of a "partial and gradual increase" in the prices of fuel and other basic commodities that aimed to improve the Administration's budget, enabling it to increase the salaries of public sector employees.³ Moreover, the Fuel Committee of the Administration adopted a [mechanism](#) to facilitate the distribution of diesel to vehicle owners through a 'smart card' system with a monthly limit based on the vehicle type; however, the majority of vehicle owners reportedly [faced](#) delays in delivery of the smart cards, hindering their access to subsidized diesel allocations and forcing them to purchase fuel at higher rates.

The Autonomous Administration allocated 300 liters of diesel for heating to each family during the 2022–2023 winter season, however, it was ultimately unable to fulfill delivery of the allocations, which were

2 The price of diesel was increased from 3,500 to 4,870 per liter, and the price of gas canisters were increased from 2,500-3,000 to 7,000 SYP

3 The Administration formed a specialized committee to conduct research and assessments to inform the Administration's budget improvement.

reportedly insufficient to meet the needs of the locals.⁴ The [head of the](#) Fuel Committee in the Administration claimed that diesel distribution to households was halted during the previous season to help farmers in the agricultural sector, which had been struggling to cope with drought. Despite the Administration's ongoing efforts to [support](#) the agricultural sector by providing subsidized fuel, unaffordability and inaccessibility of sufficient quantities of diesel continue to affect farmers, amid ongoing drought and water stress in the region. Additionally, the delay in the distribution of fuel has put farmers' livelihoods at risk and increased the cost of crop production, as many had to [purchase](#) diesel from the black market to sustain their livelihoods.⁵

The fuel shortages in northeast Syria were only worsened by the launch of Turkey's operation Claw-Sword, whereby Turkish forces targeted oil and gas facilities. The damage to infrastructure has [led](#) to interruptions to oil and gas production in Al-Hasakeh governorate, delayed distribution of fuel allocations, and further intensified local population's struggle to access materials for cooking and heating during winter. The residents of several SDF-controlled neighborhoods and villages in Aleppo governorate faced fuel, food, and medicine shortages due to the siege [imposed](#) by Syrian government forces, who prevented the entry of goods into these residential areas in late 2022. At the same time, fuel smuggling operations caused an increase in fuel prices and affected the accessibility of the commodity in northeast Syria. Despite the SDF's ongoing cross-river smuggling operations on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, reports have [indicated](#) that the SDF allegedly facilitated smugglers' movement toward Syrian government-held areas in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, to the financial benefit of the SDF.



Drought has put farmers livelihoods at risk in northern Syria. Humanitarian programs facilitating good farming practice have been set up to help the agricultural sector.

4 At the onset of winter, camp residents struggle due to lack of heating materials, blankets, warm clothes, and inadequate shelter. Media sources indicated that this has [forced](#) many to choose between food and buying heating supplies, due to the insufficient or delays in [distribution](#) of diesel. With humanitarian aid insufficient and Autonomous Administration's response to the heating needs is ineffective, camp residents were [forced](#) to burn plastic, shoes, waste, and kerosene, affecting their health.

5 A [circular](#) was issued in October that aims to preserve groundwater reserves, banned drilling of surface-level and deep wells, further restricting farmers' access to main sources of water for irrigation



Politics

- ◇ Assad grants amnesty for terrorist charges
- ◇ Damascus extends diplomatic relations
- ◇ Government settlement procedures fall flat
- ◇ Local elections fail to decentralize government

POLITICAL TRENDS

Assad grants amnesty for terrorist charges

President Bashar al-Assad issued [decree 7/2022](#) on 30 April, granting a general amnesty for Syrian citizens tried for conducting terrorist acts under the counterterrorism law 19/2012 and the penal code 148/1949 and its amendments. The amnesty excluded acts of terror which (i) led to the death of a person, and (ii) were carried out by foreign fighters against the government. Additionally, the amnesty did not affect personal lawsuits filed against individuals included in the amnesty, who could still be tried in civilian courts. The Syrian Ministry of Justice later announced on 5 May that it had removed arrest warrants, and calls for questioning for Syrian citizens both inside and outside Syria who qualified for amnesty under the new decree.

Table 3. List of terrorist acts included under amnesty [decree 7/2022](#)

Terrorist acts included under decree 7/2022
Conspiracy to commit an act of terror
Setting up or administering a terrorist organization
Joining a terrorist organization
Forcing an individual to join a terrorist organization
Funding acts of terror
Giving or receiving training on the use of methods with the intention of committing acts of terror
Manufacturing, possessing, stealing, or embezzling explosives or weapons with the intention of using them for an act of terror
Threatening the government with an act of terror
Committing an act of terror
Promoting acts of terror (spreading pamphlets, administering or using a website, etc)
Withholding information about terrorist crimes

The amnesty itself, however, seemed to be abrupt and disorganized. Dozens of detainees were reportedly released without prior notice to their families or transportation home. The disorderly release put people into a frenzy with rumors floating around of possible release locations and lists of detainees included in the amnesty surfacing on social media. Consequently, large gatherings appeared in several locations in Damascus city, particularly under the President's bridge, among other locations with people waiting for their newly released relatives. These gatherings lasted for four days before government officials came forward telling civilians that those included in the amnesty would be released individually and would not be transported to locations where gatherings were taking place. Security agencies would later fire tear gas to forcibly [disperse](#) the gatherings that remained.

Government officials reportedly praised the amnesty. Syrian Minister of Justice, Ahmad al-Sayid, [told](#) pro-government media that the decree was "a comprehensive national reconciliation for all the citizens which have benefitted from this decree and their relatives." Judge Omar Bilal [called](#) the amnesty a "historic decree because such a decree has never occurred in Syria's history." UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, [welcomed](#) the amnesty, describing it as "an important and positive development". However, the optimism may have been unfounded. The lack of proper coordination between the government's various

security agencies and branches and the government's bureaucratic process meant only a few hundred detainees were released by 15 June; Human Rights Watch [described](#) it as “humiliating and haphazard.” The amnesty, as well as an anti-torture law preceding it on 30 March, were seen as performative steps taken by Assad, [potentially](#) as part of a [phased approach](#), to gradually build trust and [appease](#) the international community.

Damascus extends diplomatic relations

Developments in Syrian–Turkish relations began to unfold in the second half of 2022, indicating a potential thawing of hostility between the two countries. A trilateral meeting between the Russian, Turkish and Syrian defense ministers and intelligence chiefs was held in Moscow on 28 December. Hulusi Akar, the Turkish defense minister, said that all the [necessary agreements](#), reportedly in relation to joint patrols with Russia in northern Syria, were reached during the meeting, and that these meetings would continue. Furthermore, [rumors](#) have emerged that a meeting between the Syrian and Turkish foreign ministers will be held in early 2023, with either the UAE or Moscow hosting.

Signs of changing Turkish attitudes towards Assad began in August, with a statement by [Mevlut Cavusoglu](#), Turkey's foreign minister, saying that without reconciliation between the opposition and the Syrian government, “sustainable peace will not be achieved.” Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, followed up by [claiming](#) that “Turkey's aim is not to defeat Assad, but rather to reach a political solution,” a significant departure from years of [calling](#) for Assad to be toppled. Similar statements by different Turkish officials have been repeated in the following months.

The August statements and the December Moscow meeting both sparked a wave of [popular protests](#) in various locations across northwest Syria. The scope and scale of this local response indicated a widespread stance among civilians and combatants alike that any future settlements with the opposition, as it stands, would not be accepted without the removal of Assad. The protests also have exposed the uneasy and complex nature of Turkey's position, in northwest Syria and beyond, particularly related to maintaining a balance between its role as the direct sponsor of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and a key regional power with a set of strategic interests overlapping and conflicting with other regional stakeholders. At the official level, [political](#) and [armed actors](#) in northwest Syria also commented on Turkish statements, carefully balancing between the need to support their ideologically-driven local support bases and to maintain a diplomatic tone towards Turkey.

The leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, [Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani](#), voiced his discontent over the steps taken by the Syrian and Turkish authorities noting that the talks between the Syrian government, its Russian ally, and Turkey were a “serious deviation” that affected “the goals of the Syrian revolution.” He affirmed his rejection of the principle of reconciliation with the Syrian government and vowed “the continuation of the revolution until the overthrow of the Syrian government” and the “liberation of Damascus.” Cavusoglu, after a meeting with the president of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, the head of the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and the prime minister of the SIG, [tweeted](#) that the meeting addressed the recent developments regarding Syria, and reiterated Ankara's support for the Syrian opposition and the Syrian people in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (which calls for a political solution to the Syrian conflict). Ned Price, a State Department spokesman, [stressed](#) his country's opposition to Syrian–Turkish normalization stating that the US would not support efforts by countries “upgrading their relations or expressing support to rehabilitate the brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad”.

In August, Cavusoglu [stated](#) that there were no Turkish preconditions for a dialogue with the Syrian government. However, an unconfirmed list of mutual Turkish–Syrian [demands](#) and conditions for reconciliation between the governments were published by a Turkish media source. According to the media source, the Syrian government requires Turkish support in continued normalization of additional countries as

well as multilateral international institutions, a major challenge with the myriad of western sanctions, which continued to [increase](#) in number and scope on an annual basis throughout 2022. Further, Turkey would likely need to hand over the border crossings between Idleb and Turkey and to cede control of parts of the M4 highway; however, officials in Damascus have demanded all Turkish-controlled territory be handed back to the Syrian government based on territorial sovereignty. Turkey, on the other hand, has allegedly demanded that the Syrian government eliminate the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Syria and that it proceeds with the Geneva process (aligned with UNSCR 2254, including the establishment of a transitional governing body to oversee the transition to peace), in addition to ensuring that Turkey monitors the implementation of a plan involving the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey. Though neither Turkey nor the Syrian government have officially confirmed these preconditions for rapprochement, they do represent the major areas of contention between both sides and are unlikely to be resolved in the short-to-medium term.

There have not been large-scale movements towards Arab normalization with the Syrian government in 2022, largely seen to be a result of [US objections to the Assad government](#), however, some countries have been increasingly interested in extending economic ties to the country. In mid-2022, there were unsuccessful efforts by some Arab countries, spearheaded by the Algerian foreign minister Ramtane Lamamra, to include Syria in the Arab Leaders Summit in Algeria. Lamamra reportedly [visited](#) Damascus in July, as part of preparations for the Summit which took place in November. According to the [General Secretary](#) of the League of Arab States, the Arab countries were divided on whether Syria should be allowed back into the League – its membership has been suspended since 2011.

By the end of the year it was clear that the developments in Syria–UAE relations were the most significant. Assad visited the UAE in March, while the UAE foreign minister, Abdullah Bin Zayed, visited Damascus [twice](#), in November 2021 and January 2023. Assad's visit to the UAE was the first diplomatic visit to an Arab country since 2011 – its symbolic value was of extreme importance, both domestically and internationally. The visit may also signify increased [Emirati participation](#) in short-term humanitarian assistance and long-term post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation projects. Emirati motives for rapproche-



President Bashar al-Assad meets with Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

ment with the Syrian government look to be 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 Jebel Ali Port in Dubai with the Nassib-Jaber crossing at the Syrian–Jordanian border.

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

The Syrian government's push to restore its relations with its surrounding countries, and Arab countries in general, is not only to rectify a decade of diplomatic isolation and a lack of geopolitical capital but is also economically motivated, with a need to improve trade and investment relationships. Assad's visit to the UAE is an indicator of the willingness of some countries in the region to cooperate, after a decade of conflict. While such developments may see further economic engagement, continued US-backed sanctions against Damascus show a fragmenting of the international community's approach towards the Syrian government, even among allies.

Despite the potential economic benefits of Syria's seemingly increasing re-engagement with regional powers and continued efforts of normalization, and while both emergency humanitarian as well as early recovery assistance is necessary, long-term infrastructure and reconstruction projects are unlikely to materialize, so long as political and territorial fragmentation, systemic corruption, little to no proper justice or accountability for transgressions during the conflict, US-led western sanctions, and high levels of insecurity continue to define Syria's political and economic landscape.

Government settlement procedures fall flat

Throughout 2022, the Syrian government conducted multiple settlements in all governorates under its control.⁶ Settlements are agreements negotiated between the government and local communities, whereby each party presents a list of demands as essential to the agreement's success; ideally, settlement agreements contribute to improved relations between the state and society, if all conditions are met, which positively impacts governance and security stability.⁷ These were meant to bolster the government's security presence in local communities, increase the rate of demilitarization of former local opposition networks, and recruit into the ranks of the military by incorporating individuals wanted for compulsory and reservist military service. These procedures are not novel, as the government [conducted](#) 60 local settlement agree-

⁶ Local sources indicated that while various government security branches, alongside the Baath party branches, facilitate and organize the settlement procedures, the settlement portfolio is mostly handled by State Security (also known as General Intelligence), headed by Brigadier Husam Louqa.

⁷ It is important to distinguish between community-based settlement agreements and reconciliations. The former entails a negotiation between the government and local community, whereby each has a list of demands they deem essential towards the settlement's success; from the government's side, these demands usually include the surrender of weapons and the relocation of settlement rejectors. The community in return requests the release of detainees and that security forces refrain from harassing locals at checkpoints. Reconciliations, in the course of the Syrian conflict, can be summarized as an unconditional attempt at peacemaking between the community and the government, whereby government forces reenter the community unobstructed, and the community arranges a celebratory welcome to their entry as a symbolic demonstration of the latter's legitimacy. The settlements discussed in this section are rather individual-oriented, as they solely target wanted civilians and evaders/defectors of compulsory military service. It is worth noting that depending on the context of a certain area, especially if it has a significant history of opposition to the government, elements of individual and community-based settlements may overlap (as has been the case in Kanaker and in Dar'a al Balad following the 2021 siege).

ments between 2013 and 2018. Local sources indicate that the continuous trend of settlements showcases the government's effort to re-engineer prior settlements as unsuccessful. The general [narrative](#), according to statements by official political and military and security figures alike, has been that settlement agreements contribute to a higher degree of law and order and amount to a form of national reconciliation.

Overall, settlement procedures in 2022 have been narrow in scope, focusing on individuals rather than entire communities. The process includes government demands that individuals wanted by its security services (due to pending security and sometimes criminal issues) as well as those wanted for compulsory and reservist military service (evaders and defectors) to report to settlement centers in their respective administrative areas of origin.⁸ The settlement procedures kicked off in government-held areas of north-east Syria, with government forces opening a center in the town of [Shmeitiyeh](#) in western Deir-ez-Zor⁹ on 7 January, followed by another in the city of [Sabkha](#) in eastern Ar-Raqqa on 10 January. These developments were accompanied by increased [security measures](#) and the establishment of checkpoints by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) near the Safyan crossing (connecting Administration-held and government-held territories), with the SDF stating they would expel individuals agreeing to settlements with the government from their zones of control.

Media sources [indicated](#) that turnout by individuals wanted for conscription was very low, adding that the majority of those taking part in settlement agreements were members of the pro-government National Defense Forces (NDF) and Iranian-backed armed groups. Meanwhile, the head of the Russian-Syrian Reconciliation Committee in Deir-ez-Zor governorate, Abdallah Shalash, [stated](#) in April that around 40,880 individuals (both civilians and military) took part in the settlements, although this figure appears high (and is unverifiable). Short-term settlement procedures were [carried out](#) in Dar'a city during January, February, and [April](#). Notably, local sources indicated that dozens of Eighth Brigade members,¹⁰ a division of the Syrian army's 5th Corps formerly backed by Russia, joined the settlements from Hrak, Kahil, and Busra esh-Sham in eastern Dar'a, with some surrendering light weapons to government forces. Semi-official media sources [claimed](#) the total number of individuals taking part in settlements in Dar'a reached around 1,500 (including civilians and individuals wanted for conscription).



Settlement centers have been established in a number of districts; uptake of people agreeing to settlement procedures has been varied.

Settlement procedures also took place in western Ghouta and Qalamoun region of Rural Damascus governorate between January and June, with government forces opening multiple centers in [Kisweh](#), [Zakieh](#), [Darayya](#), [Madamiyet el Sham](#), [At-Tall](#), [Jairoud](#), and [al-Qutayfah](#) (Al Qutayfah, At-Tall, Darayya, and Rural Damascus districts). Settlement turnout in these areas, particularly in the Qalamoun region, was similar to that in Deir-ez-Zor in that [included](#) members of pro-government armed groups and local militias affiliated with Hezbollah, with barely any civilians or individuals wanted for conscription showing up. The towns and cities of Eastern Ghouta and southern Damascus later followed suit, in October and

⁸ According to local sources, the deadline of the settlement for wanted civilians usually depends on the particularities of the agreement itself in a certain locality. Some agreements range between one week to a month, while others have only granted 24 hours for civilians to report at settlement centers, as in [Dar'a](#) in January 2022. As for those wanted for military service, local sources indicate that evaders are granted up to three to months to join while defectors are offered a period of three days.

⁹ Settlement procedures had been ongoing in Deir-ez-Zor governorate since November 2021.

¹⁰ Local sources have stated that the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps is no longer sponsored by Russia and is now officially affiliated with the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID), although it maintains a degree of autonomy in eastern Dar'a countryside.

November, with centers established in [Babella](#), [Duma](#), and [Arbin](#), which also covered Adra al Balad, Nashabiyah, Ein Terma, Zamalka, Saqba, Kafr Batna, Yalda, and Beit Sahem (Duma and Rural Damascus districts). In As-Sweida governorate, the head of State Security, Husam Louqa, inaugurated a settlement center at the April 7th Hall in As-Sweida city in October, a few months after major developments which altered the governorate's security landscape during July and August, when Harakat Rijal al Karama (Men of Dignity Movement) waged a decisive [campaign](#) against local factions affiliated with the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID), dismantling the Quowat al Fajr group headed by Raji Falhout and effectively undermining MID's influence in As-Sweida. By the end of October, media sources reported that the [number](#) of people participating in the settlement agreements reached around 4,500, of 25,000 wanted for security/criminal charges and military service.¹¹

In Aleppo governorate, settlement procedures were [carried out](#) through three centers in rural areas and one Aleppo city between January and May. Government authorities coordinated with tribal leaders, influential in the area, to encourage participation and increase turnout. By late May, pro-government media sources [reported](#) that around 13,500 individuals had joined the settlement via the rural centers, whereas information concerning turnout in Aleppo city remains unavailable. In a similar vein, settlements were conducted during late October and November in the [Wa'er neighborhood](#) of Homs city and the city of Hama (with a reported turnout of around 500 individuals in [Hama](#) and more than 1,000 in Homs), amid encouragement from pro-government tribal leaders and religious figures. Lastly, the government-controlled areas in Idleb governorate's southern countryside witnessed settlement procedures for the first time since government offensives in 2019 and 2020; the settlement center was [opened](#) on 7 September in the city of Khan Shaykhun, with the attendance of Idleb's pro-government governor Thaer Salhab and Brigadier Husam Louka. The same sources added that the procedures were performative, with a mere 30 individuals reporting to the center.

The efficiency of settlement agreements across governorates can be examined through both the level of turnout at settlement centers as well as the security situation in the post-settlement stages, particularly in governorates where government control is yet to be comprehensive (such as Dar'a and As-Sweida). Concerning turnout, various media sources reported low levels in all governorates,¹² despite pro-government media reports to the contrary.¹³ Furthermore, a significant number of individuals were motivated to join the settlement procedures to take advantage of a promised 6-month grace period, during which they would be able to obtain passports and finalize travel documentation to legally leave the country; this has been most evident in Deir-ez-Zor governorate in April, where media source reported long queues of citizens, many with settlement agreements, at the Immigration departments in the cities of Deir-ez-Zor, al Mayadeen, and AlBukamal.

The list of impediments against joining settlement procedures relates to both the vague characteristics of compulsory and reservist military service and the absence of guarantees for the safety and security of individuals and their families. For instance, the timeline of military service in the Syrian army remains [indefinite](#), a discouraging factor to a significant number of those wanted for conscription, according to parliament member Nasser al Nasser. This factor becomes increasingly important, with the low [salaries](#) and poor living conditions of Syrian army conscripts at a time when socio-economic hardships have peaked in government-held areas. Additionally, in the case of As-Sweida, the government has failed to honor its guarantees that military service will be limited within the governorate and in areas close to Damascus (that is far from the frontlines), with media sources indicating that several individuals fled service due to news about [redeployments](#) to the Syrian Badia and Deir-ez-Zor. The same concerns have been echoed in

11 This figure is based on estimates by local sources, given the unavailability of official figures. Estimates by media sources range between [22,000](#) and [40,000](#) individuals wanted for settlement.

12 <https://t.ly/nEYV>, <https://almejas.net/details.aspx?id=41203>, <https://damascusv.com/archives/47200>

13 <https://t.ly/G8oaU>, <http://www.sana.sy/?p=1787996>

eastern Aleppo in December, where around 40 settled NDF members [fled](#) to Administration-controlled areas in western Ar-Raqqa countryside after the Syrian army's Fourth Division announced its intentions to incorporate them into its ranks.¹⁴

Aside from conscription concerns, the government's failure to guarantee the safety of individuals is perhaps the more deterrent factor, as both media and local reports confirm that arrests and assassinations of settled individuals continue to be common across most governorates. Dozens were arrested by government security and military forces in eastern [Deir-ez-Zor](#) and [Ar-Raqqa](#) city shortly after joining the settlements in January. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a prominent human rights watchdog, [recorded](#) 1,016 cases of arbitrary arrests by government forces in 2022, 407 of which targeted those who had settled. This is not to mention the [assassinations](#) of settled individuals, particularly in Dar'a governorate.¹⁵

The prevalence of violations, through arrests and targeted assassinations, is fundamentally linked to the fragmented nature of the government's security sector, where multiple security branches exercise overlapping influence in the same geographical zones, described in one report as a [security archipelago](#), indicating a disconnect and lack of coordination between different security branches. A direct consequence of this is that settlements approved by one security branch can be rejected by another, either resulting in arrests or intimidation of individuals and their families, and in some cases the demand of extra [payment](#) to resolve the differences.

Local elections fail to decentralize government

On 3 August 2022, Assad issued [Legislative Decree No 216 – 2022](#), setting 18 September as a date for local administration elections. The president opened an opportunity for candidacy applications for all administrative units (municipal councils, city councils, governorate councils) between 5 and 11 August. The elections took place amid a decline in governance and socio-economic circumstances; in response to these challenges, Hussein Arnous, the Syrian prime minister, emphasized the intended shift towards administrative decentralization, [stating](#) that the government viewed the elections as “a phase through which several central governance functions will be transferred to local administration units.” The same perspective was echoed by Hussein Makhoul, the local administration and environment minister, who [claimed](#) significant progress had been made towards decentralizing governance and service provision in a manner that is unique to each locality's resources and capacities.

Technically, the existing legal frameworks allow for a transition towards a more decentralized model of governance. Law No 107–2011 granted local administrative units the [legal capacity](#) to act as agents of decentralization; this capacity was further bolstered through [Law No 37–2021](#), which increased their financial revenues and thereby their ability to play a meaningful role in support-



Voters in the government's local elections; the Baath party was accused of intervention in the process.

¹⁴ Many individuals prefer to join the local armed groups and government paramilitary organizations (such as the National Defence Forces and groups affiliated with MID) as a way to evade compulsory and reservist military service in the Syrian army. Through joining local armed groups, they guarantee serving in their areas of residence rather than risk being deployed to frontline areas in Deir-ez-Zor, the Syrian Badia, or Idleb's southern front.

¹⁵ There are no available statistics on the number of assassinated settlement joiners in government-held areas.

ing local economies and providing basic services. That said, the issues rather lie in the government's commitment to implementing these laws, shown by the questionable conduct of the September 2022 electoral process.

The Presidency of the Council of Ministers announced that a [total](#) of 59,498 approved candidates competed for over 19,086 seats for local administrative units (governorate councils, city councils, and municipalities) in 7,348 polling stations across all governorates, including in southern Idleb, which participated for the first time since 2011. The number of applicants for candidacy reportedly increased by around 25,000 [compared with](#) 2018, while the number of polling stations [increased by](#) 1,200. Government officials cited these figures as positive indicators of both the [local commitment](#) to the democratic process as well as the government's efforts to ensure easy [access](#) for voters in all localities.

However, media and local sources reported blatant interventions by the Baath Party in the electoral process, encouraging its members to apply for candidacy to secure a sufficient pool of candidates, as well as the manipulation of electoral results. In As-Sweida, the number of candidates [jumped](#) from 80 to around 1,500 between 8 and 11 August, and in Aleppo the party [instructed](#) low-ranking public sector employees to run for candidacy, only to withdraw later on election day. As for the latter, violations were reported within the Baath Party's internal '[partisan opinion poll](#)', with candidacy approvals granted not based on democratic voting procedures,¹⁶ but rather on the need to guarantee the victory of prominent families, tribes, and business owners who paid [significant sums](#) to secure seats, particularly in city and governorate councils. Additionally, local sources reported the falsification of ballot papers in several polling stations, violation of voting anonymity, and individuals voting on behalf of their families.¹⁷

Elections results were announced between 20 and 22 September,¹⁸ with the Baath-supported electoral lists securing victory by acclamation in all municipal and town-level elections in [Idleb](#) governorate, the majority of councils in [Aleppo](#) governorate, 185 councils in [Homs](#) governorate, and 18 councils in [As-Sweida](#) governorate. Media sources indicated that the pro-government National Unity electoral list [maintained](#) full control of local administrative units in northeast Syria through an alliance with the traditional local forces in Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, and Al-Hasakeh governorates. Notably, local sources emphasized that collective withdrawals by candidates in all governorates took place, especially by those who did not manage to secure the support of the Baath Party and other pro-government groups.

The violations and over-promotion of the elections generated little local interest, with [poor turnout levels](#) at ballot stations. In governorates where anti-government sentiments are particularly high, the elections were further met with retaliatory acts signaling local discontent. For instance, several ballot centers were [transferred](#) from western Dar'a towards Dar'a city following threats against the elections' organizers. In As-Sweida, on 19 September, dozens of locals from the town of Jnayneh [shut down](#) two ballot centers and prevented the electoral committee from carrying on its activities, protesting electoral violations, corruption, and poor service provision. More importantly, with almost three months past the conclusion of the local elections, no significant developments have taken place in government policy concerning the shift towards administrative decentralization – the rhetoric circulating on pro-government media outlets during the election season concerning this plan has virtually disappeared, indicating the government's inability (or lack of will) to push forward significant reforms in its model of governance.

16 Prior to election day, and to decide who gets a seat on the Baath Party's electoral list, cadre members choose their favorite candidates for the upcoming election; in other words, those who secure seats on the party's list are automatically considered as victors in the elections.

17 Local sources indicated that some individuals, especially belonging to families with a significant number of eligible voters, showed up at ballot stations with IDs of their siblings and relatives in order to channel votes for specific candidates.

18 A comprehensive list of winning candidates in city council elections (governorate's administrative centers) was later released by President Assad via [Decree No. 258](#) on 2 October.

Security

- ◇ Local militia challenge armed gangs in As-Sweida
- ◇ Infighting between opposition armed groups
- ◇ ISIS resurgence and counter-terrorism operations
- ◇ Turkey attacks northern Syria

SECURITY TRENDS

Local militia challenge armed gangs in As-Sweida

Crime has been rampant in As-Sweida governorate for several years, a trend that came to a head in the latter half of 2022. Armed groups have proliferated in the governorate, many with varying capacities and allegiances forming the governorate's current complicated political and security landscape. Many of these groups have engaged in illicit economic and criminal activities such as drug smuggling, weapons smuggling, and kidnapping to buy influence and maintain a standing militia. These groups, some of whom were previously part of the predominant Harakat Rijal al-Karama militia or the Shiryan al-Wahed coalition, eventually received political backing from the government and acted as its de-facto local agents on the ground.

However, this newfound prominence and operational space led many to abuse their power, contributing to the proliferation of a vibrant war economy in the governorate and the prevalence of acts of violence and terror experienced by residents. Qouwat al-Fajr was one such group, whose commander, Raji Falhout, became overconfident, overextending himself by challenging some of the governorate's societal pillars and aligning his group with the government's MID. This pushed many local militias to take action and put an end to the presence of government-affiliated armed groups.

In late July 2022, local militias and armed groups in As-Sweida governorate attacked the headquarters of Qouwat al-Fajr and their commander, Falhout. The headquarters, located in Atil township (As-Sweida subdistrict), was surrounded and then stormed, resulting in prolonged clashes, the death and capture of dozens of Falhout's men, and the paralysis of the As-Sweida–Damascus highway as a result of the fighting and establishment of temporary checkpoints. Local sources reported that Falhout and his group had engaged in criminal activity, accused of kidnappings, torture and involvement in the cross-border drug trade with Syria's southern neighbors. Moreover, Falhout's backing by the MID offered him protection, with few other armed actors daring to pose a challenge: in June 2022, Falhout had assisted MID fighters in their attack on the anti-government Counter Terrorism Forces' (CTF) headquarters in Khazmeh village in Milh subdistrict, which led to the CTF losing their last stronghold and their commander Samer al-Hakim being killed.

In late summer and into early autumn, As-Sweida's residents had had enough of Qouwat al-Fajr and their impunity after Falhout challenged two prominent families from Shahba city, Al-Tawil and Al-Khatib. Falhout reportedly kidnapped Jad al-Tawil, son of Hussein, the Tawil family's *Sayis* (religious leader). Qouwat al-Fajr 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. An agreement had been reached between both sides on 25 July, however, Falhout [renege](#)d on the terms, leading the situation to escalate further. Moreover, Falhout later took [escalatory](#) steps against Ariqa township (Ariqa subdistrict) residents. These events later led local militias, including [Harakat Rijal al-Karama](#), to attack Qouwat al-Fajr and end their presence.

Falhout's downfall was notably followed by the demise of other MID-affiliated groups such as Bayraq al-Fahed based in Qanawat township, Sayf al-Haq, based near As-Sweida city, and Nasser al-Sa'di's armed group based in Salkhad city. These groups were reportedly disbanded, with some of their leaders disappearing. Local sources reported in August that the security situation had improved in the governorate following these groups' disbandment, with a notable reduction in crime and drug availability in the market. Despite the demise of MID-affiliated groups and the growing role of the governorate's militias, the

government still retains strong influence. Local sources stated that State Security is in contact with the Harakat Rijal al-Karama and that Liwaa al-Jabal, a former MID affiliate, has switched sides and now works with State Security. It is possible that these events were part of a process of switching one overarching security agency with another, to operate with fewer offenses.

Infighting between opposition armed groups

Throughout the year, there were several clashes between different factions of the SNA in northern Aleppo. Clashes were catalyzed for various reasons; some were because of personal disputes between members of different groups (these were largely short-lived, only lasting a few hours). Others were confrontations which took place due to competition over income sources, including smuggling routes between Autonomous Administration and Syrian government-held areas. The most significant clashes took place in June and October, with the Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah armed group, the largest faction within the SNA's Third Corps, a primary actor. In June, Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah attacked the opposition forces of Ahrar al-Sham (also incorporated into the Third Corps), the result of political infighting and disagreements over leadership and allegiance within the SNA.

Clashes further developed when HTS forces intervened to support Ahrar al-Sham, establishing control over several villages in Afrin subdistrict and moving towards the outskirts of Afrin city for the first time since 2018 (Turkey and Turkish-backed armed groups took control of Afrin during operation Olive Branch). Similar clashes took place in October but were more violent. Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah reportedly launched a campaign against the Al-Hamzah Division, again prompting HTS to intervene in support of the latter. However, this time, HTS forces pushed forward to the outskirts of Azaz city, an Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah stronghold. On both occasions, the clashes ended following [several rounds of negotiations](#) between HTS and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah, under Turkish mediation; a ceasefire agreement was reached, and HTS later withdrew from SNA-controlled areas.

The lack of a collective or coordinated response from SNA-affiliated factions during the clashes gives insight into gaps and weaknesses within the Turkish-backed forces; weaknesses which HTS may take advantage of should it aim to expand its territory in the future, and try to dismantle the SNA's fragile allegiances. That said, it is clear that the armed actors in northern Aleppo are likely to remain – to different extents – outwardly affiliated with Turkey. Occasional infighting will not change this, however larger incidents, including gains in territory, significant losses, or control over major trade routes, are likely to change the security dynamics in the northwest. Additionally, HTS' alignment with Ahrar al-Sham, while notable (they have previously fought for territory throughout Idleb, with HTS eventually defeating Ahrar al-Sham in January 2019), may be fleeting, as a result of historical disagreements: It is doubtful this episode was intended as a show of good faith between the two actors where HTS' priority is to prove itself a 'neutral' force rather than mend burnt bridges.

One of the primary benefits to HTS (alongside the Al-Hamza Division and Ahrar al-Sham) of defeating the Third Corps is further control of profitable trade crossings in the northwest with both northeast Syria and Turkey. Al-Hamran crossing, located in the countryside surrounding Jarablus city, is one of the northwest's [most important](#) trade routes for crude oil imports from Autonomous Administration to opposition-controlled areas; previously controlled by the Third Corps, it is now under the control of the Al-Hamza Division and Ahrar al-Sham. The Third Corps used to import oil from SDF-controlled areas, and, through the Emdad company, refine it in Haraqat in the Aleppo countryside, sell it in northern Aleppo markets, and later export it to Idleb through the Watad Company. During the export process, a fee is paid for each liter to the Azaz and Afrin local councils, and the Third Corps, in addition to the cost of refining, and additional expenses added by Watad – one liter of fuel reaches Idleb is sold at a much higher price compared to when it enters the crossing. After understanding the process that the crude oil goes

through to reach Idleb to be sold as fuel, it is clear that HTS, through recent military interventions, sought to take control of the oil trade – the Third Corps (through Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah) however remains in control of the refinery and the transport routes to Idleb. What reinforces HTS’ goal is the SSG’s decision to [cancel import licenses](#) to fuel companies a week after HTS allies took control of the Al-Hamran crossing. As a result of this decision, the Watad Company announced the suspension of its operations in Idleb, and later the Tiba Fuel Company, (the company’s allegiances are unknown but are rumored to be affiliated with HTS) announced the acquisition of the Watad Company (which also were said to be affiliated with HTS, however was becoming increasingly unpopular).

These developments, along with supply-line delays to shipments coming into Turkey and transported through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, have led to fuel shortages in Idleb – HTS accused Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah in Azaz of stopping fuel tanks traveling into Idleb (accusations which were denied). The fuel sector in Idleb is in a state of instability, with its future stability contingent upon a necessary understanding between HTS and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah. Both groups need to cooperate to ensure continuous fuel supply into Idleb – whether this will continue, or one tries to gain control (through force or negotiation) remains to be seen.

The military confrontations in northern Aleppo caused displacement among civilians in northern Aleppo and Idleb, particularly in IDP camps between Turkish-held and HTS-controlled areas, such as Atma township in northern Idleb and the Deir Ballut and Muhammadiyah camps in northern Aleppo. The [Response Coordination Group](#) documented attacks on 11 camps, causing partial and complete damage to more than 58 tents in addition to the displacement of 1,600 families from the camps and more than 1,200 families inside cities and towns. During the clashes, civilians were reportedly held at a border crossing to be used as ‘human shields’ – overall five civilians were killed and thirty-eight were injured, including many women and children. Several roads and crossings were also closed to civilian movements, such as the Tadeb and Bza’a roads, Azaz–Afrin road, and the Al-Ghazawiya crossing, which was reopened after the ceasefire and the deployment of the Turkish army near the Al-Ghazawiya crossing. The Turkish army has strengthened its presence in the villages south of Afrin city and pushed concrete barriers to the Al-Ghazawiya crossing.

In addition to the military, humanitarian and economic impacts of the clashes, opposition-held Syria is now more fractured as a result. Demonstrations were held in northern Aleppo, in Azaz and Al Bab, against the entry of HTS into Turkish-controlled areas; slogans used identified HTS as a terrorist organization, which angered activists in Idleb, who viewed the accusation as rationale used by the Syrian government and Russia to launch more attacks against its civilians. Demonstrators in Idleb also raised slogans demanding the unity of the two regions under one civil and military administration. These demonstrations showcase the division between the residents of the two neighboring regions, under the rule of opposition factions, which could create future tension if they remain unresolved.

ISIS resurgence and counter-terrorism operations

ISIS continues to pose a significant security threat in Syria with a majority of its activities being reported in Autonomous Administration and government-held areas. The group conducted numerous attacks against SDF, Autonomous Administration employees, civilians and Syrian government forces and their affiliates. These attacks coincided with ISIS’ announcement of the new ‘global [revenge operation](#),’ in response to the killing of former ISIS commander, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, and former ISIS spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi, in February. Counter-ISIS operations by both the SDF and Syrian government forces, as well as international Coalition Forces, continued into 2023 throughout Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and the Syrian Badia.

On 20 January, ISIS cells [launched](#) an attack on the Al-Sina'a prison, located in the Ghweiran neighborhood of Al-Hasakeh city. The attack was orchestrated by ISIS members both outside and inside the prison – outside, two car bombs exploded near the prison while inside, guards failed to contain a prison riot. The attack led to armed clashes between ISIS cells and the SDF, who [imposed](#) a security cordon across Al-Hasakeh district (including Al-Hasakeh city, Shadadah, and Markada), limited civilian movement, and conducted counter-terrorism operations with the International Coalition's aerial support. The SDF Media Center stated that ISIS members retreated to nearby residential neighborhoods and hid in civilian homes, where the SDF continued search and arrest operations; internal displacement was recorded in these neighborhoods. The SDF [accused](#) ISIS of using children as human shields and called for international intervention. Subsequently, on 26 January, the SDF announced that it had [regained](#) full control of Al-Sina'a prison, a few days after around 300 ISIS members [surrendered](#).

ISIS activity in northeast Syria has directly affected civilian life, primarily in Deir-ez-Zor governorate. ISIS members reportedly [threatened](#) to extort shop owners, traders, pharmacists, and livestock owners under the guise of paying *zakat* (donations compulsory under Islamic law), allegedly used by the organization to [fund](#) its operations in the region. Local sources indicated that a civilian was attacked in Shiheil, and media sources [reported](#) that a currency exchange office was targeted in Izba, in northern Deir-ez-Zor after refusing to hand over cash to the alleged ISIS members. In a separate incident, seven people were killed and several others were injured in an [ISIS attack](#) conducted during an *Iftar* gathering, hosted by former Deir-ez-Zor Civil Council head of relations, Nouri Al-Hmeish. ISIS has also [threatened](#) employees of local councils and Autonomous Administration institutions with death if they continued to work in these institutions. These threats have culminated in assassinations; for instance, in October, an employee of the Shadadah local council was [killed](#) by ISIS members in southern Al-Hasakeh.



A US strike targeted the compound of ISIS leaders Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, killing the ISIS leader.

ISIS cells continued to conduct operations in Syrian government-held areas in Deir-ez-Zor and the Syrian Badia. These areas witnessed continuous [clashes](#) between Syrian government and Iranian forces against ISIS, while Russian warplanes targeted these areas with intensified airstrikes, in support of combing operations. In October, ISIS reportedly [took](#) control of Moazlieh road, near the Al-Ward oil field, in eastern Deir-ez-Zor, following the [launch](#) of a large-scale combing operation against the group in the region extending from the Sbeikhan desert to the Syrian–Iraqi border, reaching the towns and villages of Dweir, Salhieh, Al-Ward, and Moazlieh. Syrian government forces [suffered](#) significant losses during numerous attacks and operations launched by ISIS cells in the countryside of Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor.

ISIS has also targeted SDF [members](#), [military convoys](#), [checkpoints](#) and [headquarters](#) in Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates, with local sources noting that ISIS cells had been active in new regions, such as eastern Al-Hasakeh, with their movements allegedly facilitated by local tribes. In one of its most recent operations, ISIS attacked the headquarters of the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) in Ar-Raqqa city, killing six members. The SDF in cooperation with the International Coalition, conducted extensive counter-ISIS operations, targeting ISIS [affiliates](#), [leaders](#) and explosive [manufacturers](#), who allegedly conducted attacks on or were suspected of organizing new operations against members of local armed groups, civilians, ISIS prisons, and Al-Hol camp. In this context, SDF [launched](#) the second phase of its 'Humanity and Security' campaign in Al-Hol camp in September, to track down ISIS cells and main-

tain security in the camp. The SDF [arrested](#) 226 alleged participants in criminal and terrorist activities, confiscated weapons and communication devices, and destroyed locations which were allegedly being used by ISIS cells for training and indoctrination.

With the spike in ISIS activity, there were concerns in the last quarter of 2022 of the impact of the renewed Turkish offensive in efforts to combat ISIS in northeast Syria. On November 23, Commander-in-chief of the SDF, Mazloun Abdi, claimed the forces under his command were [unable](#) to continue fighting against ISIS as they were “preoccupied” with deterring Turkish attacks. White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby [stated](#) that the US did not want to see operations that “could cause civilian casualties, could cause casualties of our personnel and could distract our SDF partners from a very real and very important mission ongoing against ISIS.” The statements highlight the importance of the US-led International Coalition’s [partnership](#) with the SDF, given the financial and military support it provides to anti-ISIS operations, particularly at a time of heightened ISIS activity in the region.

Turkey attacks northern Syria

Turkey’s National Defense Ministry [announced](#) the launch of military operation Winter Eagle on 2 February, against the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the PKK in Syria (Al-Malikeyyeh governorate) and northern Iraq (Sinjar and Karachak regions). The Turkish air force targeted ammunition warehouses, hideouts, military posts and headquarters. Turkish media sources referred to Winter Eagle as a counter-terrorism operation, with the defense minister, Hulusi Akar, claiming it was a success; according to him, “a great number of terrorists were neutralized.” Following this, Erdogan [stated](#) during his speech after a meeting with the Turkish government in May, that Turkish forces would launch a new operation in northern Syria to secure a ‘buffer zone’ at a depth of 30 kilometers on Syrian–Turkish border to ensure national security. The Turkish president later [identified](#) Menbij and Tell Refaat as the targets. In July, during a summit within the Astana framework in Tehran, the Russian, Iranian and Turkish leadership [expressed](#) their determination to continue working together to combat terrorism”, however, Turkey’s [stance](#) on launching a new military operation in northern Syria did not receive support from the other parties, with Erdogan later [stating](#) that the military operation would “remain on the agenda until its (Turkey’s) security concerns were addressed.”

Then, on 20 November, Turkey announced the launch of operation Claw Sword [against](#) the SDF, YPG and PKK, in retaliation for the alleged PKK/YPG orchestrated Istanbul bombing in late November. Similar to his previous statements, Erdogan reiterated the “necessity to establish the buffer zone, fight terrorism, and ensure national security.” The SDF [press center](#) alleged that both civilian and military sites, economic facilities and vital infrastructure were targeted in the villages of Tal Tamer, Quamishli, Amuda, Ras al Ain, Malikeyyeh, Ein Issa, Tell Abiad, Tell Refaat, Ain al Arab (Kobani), Afrin, and Menbij during the operation, with media sources [stating](#) that Syrian government military positions were also bombed in Al-Hasakeh, Tell Refaat, and Ain al Arab (Kobani). The aerial operation was reported to be accompanied by ground operations by Turkish and Turkish-backed forces, to target primarily Tell Refaat, Menbij, and Ain al Arab (Kobani) to cut off the SDF’s supply routes.

Several civilians were [killed](#), and more displaced, during operation Winter Eagle, as Turkish forces targeted a power station in Malikeyyeh, which also resulted in power cuts in some residential neighborhoods. Autonomous Administration employees were targeted near Amuda and Darbasiyah, and civilian casualties were [recorded](#) in these regions. The sporadic clashes in Qamishli, Amuda, Tell Abiad, and Menbij [led](#) to the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including [health facilities](#). Another wave of displacement took place in northeast Syria following Erdogan’s announcement of operation Claw Sword in June, with civilians and business owners chose to leave their homes and businesses near the frontlines for safer places, such as Tabqa and Ar-Raqqa cities, ahead of a potential military escalation.

During operation Claw Sword, in addition to military posts, allegations surfaced that Turkish forces [hit](#) civilian and public infrastructure, causing damage to health and educational facilities, oil stations, power plants, grain silos, and gas stations, primarily in Qamishli and Malikiyyeh, causing prolonged power cuts, and interruptions in oil and gas production. The Autonomous Administration's control over natural resources in the northeast contributes to its authority and economic power, hence it is possible that Turkey's attacks on the oil and gas infrastructure were calculated to destabilize its power. These attacks further [exacerbated](#) humanitarian needs and led to further delays in the distribution of diesel used for heating in the region. The co-chair of the Tal Tamer council [stated](#) that Turkish attacks resulted in shortages of basic services (including drinking water, electricity, and fuel in 23 villages located near the frontlines with Turkish-backed forces).

The US [condemned](#) any escalation in northeast Syria and warned Turkey against launching military operations in May, as it would jeopardize the safety of its soldiers deployed in the region. Additionally, US senators from the House of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Relations Committee expressed their [concerns](#), after Erdogan's renewed threats to launch a military operation, stressing the detrimental impact of military escalation on the SDF and International Coalition's joint counter-terrorism operations against ISIS. After the launch of operation Claw Sword in November, the US [called for](#) immediate de-escalation and expressed similar concerns related to the safety of its soldiers and counter-terrorism operations. Amid Turkish threats to launch ground operations and ongoing efforts to deter Turkish attacks, the SDF temporarily [suspended](#) its joint counter-terrorism operations; the SDF claimed that the suspension of its security operations, particularly in [Al-Hol camp](#), could result in an ISIS resurgence. The US, however, refrained from fully criticizing its NATO ally; with Turkey attributing the operation to guaranteeing national security, a spokesperson for the White House National Security division [stated](#) that "Turkey has the right to defend itself." Turkey continues to claim the SDF is a branch of the PKK, classified a terrorist organization by both countries, and the YPG is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey alone, while the SDF remains the US' primary ally in combating ISIS.

Russia also expressed its concerns over Turkish threats in June, with Russian envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, [stating](#) that he warned his Turkish counterpart that any incursion "is likely to reinforce Kurdish secessionist tendencies and incentivize them to create their own state." He added that such a state "would neither be in Syria, Turkey, Iran, nor Iraq's interests." Russia also [warned](#) Turkey against using "excessive" force after the launch of operation Claw Sword. While Erdogan [reiterated](#) his stance on the establishment of a 'safe zone' stipulated by the Sochi agreement (2019) to its Russian counterpart, the SDF [called for](#) Russian support in concluding an agreement with the Syrian government and accessing military support to protect the Autonomous Administration-held areas against a Turkish operation.¹⁹

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has strengthened Turkey's diplomatic leverage; as a mediator and power broker, it has [maintained](#) its ties with Russia by providing an economic lifeline amid Western sanctions, and with Ukraine, by providing military support. Additionally, Turkey's role as a member of NATO has presented it with the opportunity to push for its national interests. This in turn may be a significant contributor to an Erdogan victory in the upcoming presidential elections. However, Turkey's goal to expand its influence in northern Syria, primarily in Autonomous Administration-held areas, remains hindered by US presence in the region where the fight against ISIS continues to be a major security concern.

19 In June, amid growing fears of a Turkish military operation, the SDF [decided](#) to coordinate with the Syrian government. Although this decision sparked [concerns](#) among civilians and members of SDF, as many young men feared conscription or arrest by the Syrian government, SDF Commander-in-Chief ensured that the coordination with Syrian government will not undermine SDF's control over the region and their priority "is [defending](#) Syrian territory, and no one should think about taking advantage of that situation to make gains on the ground."



HUMANITARIAN

- ◇ Security council extends cross-border aid
- ◇ Syria responds to cholera outbreak
- ◇ Teachers demonstrate for education reform
- ◇ Fuel shortages leave families cold

HUMANITARIAN TRENDS

Security council extends cross-border aid

The cross-border aid resolution was extended twice in 2022, the first in January when the UN Security Council extended the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for aid deliveries for six months, as part of [Resolution 2585](#) (agreed in July 2021). The second resolution was agreed upon by the Security Council on July 12, after the adoption of [Resolution 2642](#) (expiring 10 January 2023) – the July resolution this time called for a separate agreement in January 2023, rather than an extension of the current resolution as had been the case the previous year.

The duration of the renewal and the tenuous negotiations and failed Security Council votes that preceded the adoption of 2642 highlight the potential that UN-mandated cross-border humanitarian operations into northwest Syria could be stopped, despite the prolonged and far-reaching humanitarian needs in the region. Both extensions needed lengthy negotiations with Russia to get final approval; the January extension was in [exchange for a softening](#) of rules against NGOs working on early recovery projects, and restrictions against aid to Damascus. The July extension succeeded only after two unsuccessful votes, and after Russia's deputy ambassador, Dmitry Polyansky, [warned](#) that “unless council members decide to go with the Russian six months proposal, he saw no possibility of an agreement”.



Aid trucks at Bab al-Hawa crossing: Aid deliveries were extended into northwest Syria for a further six months in January 2023

Since 2021, and the adoption of resolutions 2585 and 2642, which included requirements for cross-line aid delivery (controlled by Damascus, into Idleb) alongside cross-border aid delivery, only [10 aid convoys](#) (153 trucks) entered Idleb from government-held areas in Aleppo. In 2022, only 82 aid trucks entered through the cross-line mechanism [compared](#) to 8,390 aid trucks through the cross-border mechanism; less than 1% of the total humanitarian aid delivered to the northwest was from cross-line deliveries. The Response Coordination Group condemned on several occasions the entry of cross-line aid, maintaining it could substitute for cross-border aid from the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with

Turkey. 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. Households in northwest Syria continue to experience difficult humanitarian conditions amid economic crisis; at least 2.8 million people (65% women and children) [depend](#) on aid provided by the current UN-led cross-border response to meet their basic needs every month through the cross-border delivery mechanism.

On 9 January 2023, the Security Council adopted [Resolution 2672](#), again extending the delivery of UN cross-border aid into Syria for a further six months. The new resolution was agreed upon with the same contingencies in place as Resolution 2642 (which expired on 10 January 2023). The resolution mandates that the Secretary-General provides a monthly brief and a regular report, at least every 60 days, on the implementation of the resolutions agreements to include “overall trends in unhindered, safe UN cross-line operations” and detailed information on humanitarian assistance delivered through cross-border operations. The Security Council also encouraged the “convening of an informal interactive dialogue every two months to regularly review the implementation of the resolution, including progress in early recovery

projects.” The Russian ambassador to the UN stated that “there neither can nor will be a discussion of a mechanical extension of the Mechanism, and a new six-month extension in July will not occur unless the approach to providing humanitarian assistance in Syria changes.”

Whole of Syria responds to cholera outbreak

Syria experienced a nationwide cholera outbreak in mid-September 2022, the first seen [since](#) 2009. The country’s water infrastructure has been heavily [damaged](#) following a decade of conflict, hindering the local population’s access to clean water. Water levels in the Euphrates river basin, which provides irrigation, hydroelectric power and water to much of the northeast, [have fallen](#) to dangerously low levels, forming polluted swamps and restricting access to potable water. Drought has also hit northern Syria, leaving farmers desperate to find alternative means to irrigate crops – the practice of using wastewater (often contaminated with sewage), became more [widespread](#), further contaminating crops. Water stress in northeast Syria was also exacerbated by [Turkey’s alleged disruption](#) of water supply to Alouk water station, which serves more than 460,000 in Al-Hasakeh governorate. Inconsistent water availability across Syria, particularly in the northeast, forced the local population to rely on [water trucks](#), which are often unregulated, with water companies accused of selling contaminated water from the Euphrates. In IDP camps in the northwest, their proximity to open sewage sites was also a factor. The outbreak led the Syrian government and the de-facto administrations across the country to implement measures, with some international support, to prevent the outbreak from spreading further.

Damascus

The Syrian Ministry of Health announced a [cholera outbreak](#) in government-held areas in mid-September, [reporting](#) 15 positive cases in Aleppo governorate. Shortly after, inspection teams affiliated with the ministry [indicated](#) that sample tests taken from sewage networks and an ice cube factory also turned out to be positive for cholera, prompting its immediate closure. The Ministry’s [Media Office](#) reported on 17 December that there were a cumulative total number of 1,627 positive cases the majority of which were registered in Aleppo governorate (997) and Deir-ez-Zor (234), Al-Hasakeh (97), and Lattakia (92). There were [49 casualties](#), 40 from Aleppo governorate. The reports on cases in government-held areas may be underestimated, with several anonymous medical professionals in Damascus [indicating](#) that the government prohibited them from discussing developments with media sources.

In terms of response, UNICEF, WHO, and partner organizations have [implemented](#) a multisectoral approach towards the outbreak, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, mobilizing WASH and health supplies and providing rapid diagnostic tablets and tests for home-based water treatment. [Measures](#) also included engaging local communities through media and dialogue posts, direct door-to-door visits, and raising awareness about cholera’s causes, symptoms, and preventative measures. On 29 November, trucks carrying [two million doses](#) of the oral cholera vaccine (OCV) arrived in Damascus. Shortly thereafter, on 5 December, the Ministry of Health [launched](#) a two-week national vaccination campaign against cholera in non-government-held areas, targeting the most vulnerable governorates (Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakeh). The head of the Primary Health Care Unit at the Ministry of Health, Dr. Razan al Tarabishi, [stated](#) that the campaign was implemented via 63 health centers, 684 mobile teams, and with the participation of 2,269 health workers. On 9 January, the Ministry of Health’s Media Office estimated that the vaccination rate of targeted communities in the governorates [reached](#) around 95% (a total of 1,901,142 individuals out of the planned 1,993,169). Additionally, the Italian government [contributed](#) €500,000 to the WHO’s Cholera Response in October; the donation will be used to increase the capacity of five microbiological labs in Damascus, Tartous, Lattakia, Homs, and Hama, and fund the establishment of other labs in Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor.

While these statistics, if accurate, represent a comprehensive response towards curbing a further outbreak, southern and coastal governorates under government control have not been covered by the campaign. Local sources in Dar'a, As-Sweida, Damascus, and Rural Damascus unanimously confirmed that there are no plans to expand the vaccination campaign to include these governorates. No cholera-related capacity-building or preventative measures were reported in As-Sweida governorate's health facilities, concerning given that an outbreak is possible particularly in the governorate's [western countryside](#) where agricultural lands are irrigated by wastewater. In Dar'a, the Directorate of Health stated on 22 September that [medical teams](#) have been formed at the level of city centers in the governorate; Dr. Basam Sweidan, the Directorate's head, revealed that a laboratory in Dar'a city was provided with cholera testing kits. Additionally, the director of the Dar'a National Hospital General Assembly, Dr. Yehya Kiwan, stated that the Assembly had [rehabilitated](#) the hospital's emergency section and established a 20-bed section equipped for hosting cholera patients.

Syrian Salvation and Syrian Interim Governments

The first confirmed case of cholera in northwest Syria was [recorded](#) on 19 September in Marma Elhajar village, Jarablus subdistrict, in northern Aleppo. The SIG's Ministry of Health, operating in northern Aleppo, reported a [contaminated well](#) had been identified. Less than a week later, the first three cholera cases were recorded in [Kaflossen camps](#) in Idlib. More than [544 cases](#) were recorded in various areas of the northwest, out of 31,760 suspected cases at the end of 2022. IDP camps were most affected, with [27%](#) of the total number of cases recorded.

The SIG and SSG were quick to warn of the possibility of cholera spreading and took several measures to prevent its spread, even before recording the first confirmed case. The SIG Ministry of Health [requested](#) that civilians follow preventative measures and asked health sector workers and organizations to be prepared. The Ministry also called on healthcare workers to monitor drinking water sources, treat potential contamination, improve sewage systems, and increase the supply of clean water from humanitarian organizations conducting WASH programming. The SSG [published](#) similar instructions and [warned](#) farmers against irrigating crops with untreated wastewater.

The warnings and measures announced by the health authorities in the northwest represent the limits of their capacities to deal with an outbreak: Without international support, the healthcare system is



An IDP camp in northwest Syria, where open sewage canals and sewers are widespread.

likely to struggle with a high-level outbreak. In the northwest, the high population density and absence of sufficient infrastructure mean cholera can spread more easily. More than 1.5 million IDPs live in 1,396 camps throughout northern Syria, many poorly supplied with water and sewage infrastructure (open sewage canals and sewers are widespread); only 37% of camps have [proper sewage systems](#) installed, and some informal settlements have no sewage infrastructure. Access to clean drinking water is lacking in [590 camps](#) with residents dependent on water tanks or other potentially unsafe sources, while 1,223 camps have no medical points. The WASH [response](#) in the camps has reached only 32.7% of people, with the gap needing to be filled in 2023.

Autonomous Administration

On 11 September, the co-chair of Autonomous Administration's Health Committee announced the registration of the first cholera cases in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates and by the end of the year, [29,566](#) suspected cases were recorded by the Early Warning, Alert and Response Network (EWARN). At the onset of the cholera outbreak in northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration and humanitarian organizations worked towards strengthening the healthcare sector's capacity to address the needs of cholera patients and suspected cholera cases. The Kurdish Red Cross (KRC) [organized](#) meetings with Health Committees and directors of health centers to implement the necessary measures to prevent a cholera outbreak, in addition to coordinating with other humanitarian organizations to provide necessary assistance in different communities. The KRC also [provided](#) direct medical assistance to suspected cholera cases, including IDPs, in al-Hikma Hospital's operating room, run jointly with the WHO in Al-Hasakeh city. Under the supervision of Health Committees affiliated with Autonomous Administration, a specialized health center was [established](#) in Ar-Raqqa where suspected cholera cases were transferred from other health centers in the governorate and an emergency cell was [established](#) in Kisreh hospital, addressing the medical needs of Deir-ez-Zor's population, alongside other [clinics](#) in the governorate. In light of the increasing need for medical supplies, personnel and assistance in the region, the director of Kisreh hospital [claimed](#) that "the support of humanitarian organizations is not sufficient". Due to its limited resources, the Autonomous Administration issued a [circular](#) in September prohibiting the transfer of medical supplies to other zones of control from the warehouses in northeast Syria, without its written approval. During the last quarter of 2022, the WHO supported the healthcare sector by distributing 30 tonnes of medical supplies to cholera treatment centers, providing capacity training to medical personnel, and testing the quality of water used in the region.

The Autonomous Administration implemented several precautionary measures to prevent infection in northeast Syria. The Administration's Health Committee [published](#) guidelines and [launched](#) cholera awareness campaigns. Efforts have been made to monitor and enhance the quality of water across all governorates in the region. Water samples were collected and [tested](#) periodically in Ar-Raqqa, liquid chlorine was [distributed](#) by the Water Corporation to disinfect drinking water in Deir-ez-Zor, and a '[crisis cell](#)', composed of the Health Committee, Water Corporation, municipalities, and civil society organizations was formed to implement awareness raising and water treatment-related activities in Al-Hasakeh, where local councils and the KRC [sterilized](#) water tanks used by health centers. Additionally, water quality and vegetables were monitored, and awareness campaigns were organized in IDP [camps](#), by the camps' administrations and humanitarian organizations.

Teachers protest for education reform

The education sectors in the northeast and northwest faced significant disruptions, with teachers striking for more pay, and better working conditions, and against disagreements over governing bodies and the curriculum. In the northwest, districts in Turkey oversee education in SIG-controlled areas, while in Idleb, teachers held strikes throughout the year, many having worked unpaid for long periods. Moreover, the Autonomous Administration closed and fined schools teaching the Syrian government's internationally recognized curriculum, in an attempt to introduce its own throughout its areas.

Northern Aleppo

Teachers in northern Aleppo began their protests towards the end of 2021 and reignited them over several months in 2022, mainly in February and September. The protests extended to areas under the control of the SIG for the first time in February and continued later in the year. At the beginning of the new education year, in September, teachers started a six-week strike to demand salary increases and improved

teaching conditions in the northern Aleppo cities of A'zaz, Al-Bab, Ar-Ra'ee and Aghtrin. During the strike, the teachers refused several negotiations which did not meet their demands.²⁰ However, the threat of dismissal from local authorities, the length of the proposed strikes, and a lack of solidarity to continue forced the teachers to accept an agreement in mid-October. Teachers' representatives and the local councils in A'zaz and Al-Bab cities agreed on [several points](#); recognition of the teachers' union, the creation of a 'popular fund' to support teachers under the joint supervision of the local council and the teachers' union, and a committee elected at the National Conference on Undergraduate Education. The head of the Azaz teachers' union explained that the teachers had 14 demands which the agreement partially addressed, while the rest of the demands required higher-level negotiations with the Turkish authorities. The implementation of the agreement was ensured by the independent committee, in which several actors participated, including representatives of the SIG, the scientific and professional syndicates, the Turkish Religious Endowment, and the Syrian Islamic Council.

Problems facing the education sector in SIG-governed areas are complicated because of the differences in governance depending on geographical area. Turkey officially began supervising the governance of areas gained during operation Euphrates Shield following the defeat of ISIS in early 2017. This started with the restructuring of local councils, which in turn supervise the work of service sectors including healthcare and education – these would now come under the authority of governors in southern Turkish governorates. With the education sector, the Turkish Ministry of Education established local educational offices affiliated with local councils to manage the provision of education in each city in coordination with the Turkish Ministry of Education. The SIG has now absolved itself of [responsibility for education](#) in northern Aleppo, maintaining it does not have influence in the sector from Afrin in Aleppo to Ras al-Ain in Al-Hasakeh; all the schools in these areas belong to the local councils and are therefore under Turkish jurisdiction.

Idleb

The teachers' strike extended to the areas of the SSG in Idleb in October, where nearly 80 teachers went on strike in several schools demanding monthly salaries from the government. According to the protesters, the SSG had not fulfilled its promises to pay teachers regularly. The strike included the [Al-Mutanabi and Al-Thawra schools](#), which are the only secondary schools with more than 50 classes; according to one of the teachers, more than 2,000 high school students were affected. The SSG announced after a meeting of the General Shura Council in Idleb announced [financial support](#) to the teaching and administrative units in the Ministry of Education; those from secondary schools were supported at the beginning of Novem-

Table 4. Number of schools and students affected by strikes in Idleb.

<p>Primary Schools: 465 (341 supported, 124 unsupported). Primary school students: 266,494 (grades 1–4)</p>
<p>Intermediate (middle) schools: 540 (358 supported, 182 unsupported) Intermediate school students: 136,000 (grades 5–9)</p>
<p>Secondary schools: 130 (93 supported, 37 unsupported). Secondary school students: 26,015 (grades 9–12)</p>
<p>Total number of school students 520,000.</p>

²⁰ Despite threats that the teachers would not be paid at the beginning of the year, the teachers union resisted ending the strike, saying decisions for dismissal are in the power of Turkish officials, rather than officials in the directorates of education or local councils in Aleppo.

ber, and those from intermediate schools were supported at the beginning of December. The [SSG Minister of Education](#) reported the numbers of students and schools, supported and unsupported, as shown in Table 4.

Autonomous Administration

Amid deteriorating living and economic conditions in northeast Syria, primarily due to the continuous depreciation of the Syrian pound, teachers organized protests calling for their salaries to be linked to the US dollar to account for inflation (and the black-market exchange rate). In March, open [strikes](#) and school [closures](#) were announced in Deir-ez-Zor, Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa. In addition to an improvement in living conditions, the teachers [called](#) on the Autonomous Administration to improve service provision to schools, increase spending on educational materials, increase teachers' health benefits, provide transportation allowances,²¹ and enhance school security. Similar protests were [organized](#) in September and October, also in [Menbij](#), with no significant response from the Autonomous Administration. According to media sources, the Autonomous Administration's inability to effectively respond to the protestors is associated with institutional [corruption](#); protestors in Deir-ez-Zor accused members of the region's Educational Committee of corruption and demanded their [dismissal](#). Despite the Autonomous Administration's continuous efforts to [support](#) the education sector through school rehabilitation activities, teacher capacity strengthening programs and developing the curriculum following international standards, the education sector continues to face challenges such as poor [infrastructure](#) and inadequate services, lack of or insufficient school furniture and classroom [equipment](#), lack of textbooks and an insufficient number of [teachers](#).

The Administration's struggles with the education sector continued in September when it [closed](#) several private and public schools teaching the Syrian government's curriculum in Qamishli city and [imposed](#) SYP 25 million (\$3,912) fines for violating the decision. The closure of these schools was [presented](#), by the co-chair of the Autonomous Administration's Education Committee, as a measure to target institutions which were using "education as means of trade" and were operating without a license – however the measures were seen as a means to remove the government's curriculum from the region. Various sources indicated that families choose to send their children to these schools, despite high tuition fees, as they follow an internationally recognized curriculum. The school closures led to popular protests in Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates, where the Autonomous Administration's curriculum was [rejected](#) by the local population – it is accused of being incompatible with the customs and traditions of Arab-majority communities.²² Additionally, protestors in Deir-ez-Zor [demanded](#) UNICEF's intervention to prevent any changes in the curriculum developed by the organization; this curriculum, alongside subjects such as Islamic education and history were being taught in the region, in preparation for the ninth grade and baccalaureate exams under the supervision of Syrian government's Ministry of Education. The Autonomous Administration's Education Committee [issued](#) a statement suspending the distribution of mathematics and science books in Deir-ez-Zor governorate after local educational groups objected to its curriculum.

21 Soaring transportation costs also contributed to disruptions in the educational sector. Local sources indicated that transportation costs further financially burden families, additionally media sources reported that teachers were unable to bear the transportation [expenses](#) and attend school, especially after the Autonomous Administration stopped supporting the teachers in this matter during the 2022-2023 academic year

22 Another measure by the Autonomous Administration that was seen as incompatible with the customs of local communities was the issuance of a new circular, which banned the niqab in schools, [prompting](#) popular anger and demonstrations in the villages of Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh. While an official from the Educational Committee claimed that the "decision was issued based on security concerns and does not contradict the customs of the local community or Islamic law", teachers in the region believed that this is a violation of freedom of expression, and can also limit girls' access to education.

Fuel shortages leave families cold

Locals in government-held areas are reliant, to a large extent on government subsidies and deliveries of fuel for heating during the winter. The government's subsidy allocation system, part of state support for the poorest communities, was heavily cut in 2022; citizens' fuel allocations in winter were either cut completely, or reduced. The Ministry of Fuel and Mineral resources also struggled to keep up with oil deliveries, and with demand.

In preparation for the coming winter, the Ministry announced that citizens who qualified to receive subsidized diesel for heating could register, as of 14 September, via the smart card's 'Way-In' application. Smart card holders applied for the first batch of subsidized diesel, amounting to 50L (at 500 SYP per liter), with priority distribution to areas with colder temperatures and individuals with the most recent purchase request. The Ministry added that, from 1 October, smart card holders may register for unsubsidized diesel allocations, again of 50L, priced at 2,500 SYP per liter. Local sources explained that the Syrian Company for Storing and Distributing Petroleum Materials (SADCOB, or the Mahrukut Company) delivered the subsidized diesel allocations to residential areas via tankers, whereas for unsubsidized diesel, citizens could designate their favored gas stations (private and public) as pickup locations to collect once notified via text messages.

The levels of distribution of diesel did not meet the government's [announced](#) objectives (to finalize the distribution of the first allocations by the end of 2022): Distribution is ongoing at the time of writing, and local sources report that several eligible households are yet to receive their allocations. Distribution levels during January 2023 varied between 42% in [Dar'a](#), 30-40% in [Aleppo](#), 80% in al [Hasakeh](#), 63% in [Tartus](#), 58% in [Deir-ez-Zor](#), and 59% in [As-Sweida](#), while the deliveries were reportedly suspended in [Aleppo](#), [Hama](#), [Latakia](#), and [Homs](#) governorates between November and December. The government has struggled to procure enough fuel to meet the increased demand of its citizens, and has prioritized food and service providers in its allocations – bakeries, hospitals and public transport received priority diesel deliveries.

According to local sources, 50L of diesel, if used only for heating, is reportedly enough to last a maximum of ten days during the winter, forcing Syrian families to purchase diesel on the black market. However, the price of black-market diesel had increased at a rate of 510% by October 2020, and is now unaffordable for most. The estimated average salary in government-held areas is 150,000, and by December 2022, the price of black-market diesel fluctuated between 10,000 and 13,000 SYP for a single liter in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and As-Sweida governorates. Several media sources indicated that, given the black market price, many families are choosing to sell their diesel allocations on the black market, for the extra cash, as reported in [Homs](#), [Damascus](#), and [Rural Damascus](#).

In response, households in government-held areas have sought alternatives to diesel for heating throughout the winter. These included traditional heating sources, such as [firewood](#), cypress cones, [olive cakes](#), and [animal manure](#), and unconventional sources such as nutshells, [alcohol-based fuels](#), or sometimes [dangerous](#) alternatives like waste and plastic.

The increase in demand for firewood as an alternative heating source has caught the attention of companies looking to profit. Families in forested areas source their firewood by collecting fallen branches or taking wood from trees which have been pruned, and through illicit logging. This can be sufficient for personal use, however, with the huge increase in demand, businesspeople and organized crime groups have turned to logging for trade. Illicit logging takes place across Hama, As-Sweida, Tartous, Latakia and Dar'a, amid an absence of effective forestry monitoring and measures to stop entire forests being cut down. Sources said that illicit logging and the firewood trade became part of organized crime in As-Sweida in 2017 following a deterioration of the economy, and, as in 2022, fuel shortages. Local militias affiliat-

ed with the MID began logging, selling, and directing the firewood trade in the governorate. Additionally, officers in the 4th Division and the Republican Guard were the guarantors of the firewood trade in Rural Damascus; sources stated that they would cut down entire orchards and forested areas, which they would later sell at markets. Traders who were not directly affiliated with security agencies were overseen by the military and security forces.

Competition over firewood has negatively impacted social stability within As-Sweida governorate and the Lajat region between Dar'a and As-Sweida. On 8 September, two Druze locals were [killed](#), reportedly by Bedouin gunmen, while engaging in illicit logging activities in the Lajat region northwest of As-Sweida, sparking retaliation by the Laith al Bal'ous local armed group, which kidnapped two Bedouins. These incidents show the potential transformation of illicit logging activities into a conflict driver between communities.

Lastly, illicit logging activities, especially when practiced at an organized large scale, have had a detrimental effect on forest cover in government-held areas. HAT reported losses of forest cover in [As-Sweida](#) and Quneitra governorates (81% and 20% respectively). Absent effective government intervention to combat illicit logging, the environmental impacts of deforestation (soil erosion and degradation, and climatic changes such as increased flooding and windstorms), could affect government-held areas.



A young Syrian burns firewood to keep warm in plummeting winter temperatures. Fuel allocations have fallen short of household needs, while distribution throughout southern governorates has been slow.

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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.

