



2023 SYRIA IN REVIEW: POLITICAL TRENDS



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Executive Summary

Throughout the year 2023, there were novel political interactions among diverse international, regional, and domestic actors engaged in the Syrian crisis. On the regional level, the most important events that contributed to changing the political dynamics in Syria were the Turkish presidential elections, the 6 February earthquake, and Syria's return to the Arab League. Moreover, the distraction caused by the War in Gaza has emboldened actors relevant to Syria to intensify their efforts toward achieving their goals.

The year started with indications of a possible development in the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement, but the momentum generated in late 2022 faded towards the end of 2023. Meanwhile, Arab states initiated contact with Damascus to resume relations which ultimately led to Syria's readmission into the Arab League and the participation of the Syrian President in the Arab League Summit in Jeddah in mid-May.

Despite the initial flurry of activity and numerous discussions, none of them notably influenced or resulted in tangible changes in Syria's prevailing isolated situation. This lack of impact serves as a stark indicator of the escalating complexity of the Syrian crisis over the past decade, compounded by the West's persistent refusal to unconditionally normalize relations with Damascus.

Within Syria, various zones of control experienced an array of political dynamics that aimed at shaping the internal political landscape. The most notable of such dynamics taking place within areas controlled by the Government of Syria are the protests against the declining economy in various locations, especially in As-Sweida, and on social media.

In northwest Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) focused on organizing its internal structure and neutralizing potential competitors, while the affiliated Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) aimed to bolster control over its territories and enhance centralization in governance. In northeastern Syria, clashes erupted between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Arab tribes over long-standing political differences. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) concluded the year by issuing a modified social contract, addressing relationships within society and potential future agreements with the Syrian government.

Below are the key takeaways from Crisis Analysis–Syria's (CA–SYR) political overview for the 2023 Syria in Review series.

Key Takeaways

- The Syrian-Turkish rapprochement appeared to accelerate at the beginning of the year. Driven by Turkish electoral goals and met with Syrian government reservations, no tangible results were reached by the end of 2023.
- Syria's path to normalization with Arab states equally failed to reach its heights, following Damascus inversely settling priorities that foster growth in that relationship. As such, the Syrian government did not meet the steps put forward by Arab states, perhaps due to the lack of ability or desire, or both, which ultimately led to a standstill in that process.
- In 2023, the Syrian government managed to be a main actor in the UN cross-border aid flow by granting the UN permission to use the border crossings in northwest Syria outside of the UNSC mandate. Currently, aid entering opposition-held northwest Syria relies on Damascus's approval, giving the Syrian government leverage in potential future talks with Turkey or opposition groups.
- The developments on the Syrian government's normalization with Turkey and Arab countries motivated the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to signal its willingness for a dialogue with the Syrian government.
- By the end of January 2024, over five months after As-Sweida protests demanding the 'overthrow of the regime' began, the Syrian government is still unable to find a way out of this crisis and thus continues to ignore it.

- The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) strengthened their role and control over their areas of influence in the northwest, taking advantage of the earthquake that struck the region to impose more regulatory measures that support the centralization of decision-making, in addition to neutralizing many competitors to HTS's leadership from within its ranks.
- Last year, existing schisms within AANES-held northeastern Syria between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and members of Arab tribes became blatantly public. These frictions cultivated in both parties clashing, with members of Arab tribes later forming the Arab Tribal Forces to stand against SDF and AANES rule.
- The political events unfolding in Syria in 2023 underscored how the absence of international actors, particularly Western states, in these developments has hindered the prospects of advancing change.

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The intricate and stagnant political situation in Syria, both domestically and regionally, reflects the persistent involvement of regional actors and emphasizes the prolonged duration of the conflict, which has now spanned nearly 13 years. The government's strained relationship with its regional neighbors and the international community has exacerbated Syria's continued isolation, sustained by its internal military, ideological, and economic fragmentation.

Despite this entrenched divisiveness, Syria remains interconnected in many ways. Political developments in Syria throughout 2023 best demonstrate this interconnectivity, particularly the Syrian government's potential rapprochement with Turkey and normalization with Arab states. These developments have spurred local actors throughout Syria to adopt a reactive posture, concerned about the risk of relinquishing their positioning while simultaneously addressing intricate challenges within their spheres of control. In this report, CA–SYR attempts to recap the major political developments affecting Syria throughout 2023. Through examining these developments at the 'Whole of Syria' level, CA–SYR unpacks these developments, outlining their current status and prospects.

International and Regional

Syrian politics in 2023 began with the possibility of the Syrian–Turkish relationship taking a significant turn. Meetings between high-ranking officials from both states, public statements by President Erdogan, and pledges by Turkish Presidential candidates began to indicate that a path towards a rapprochement between the two countries was possible, potentially representing a significant shift in Turkey's Syria policy. However, following President Erdogan's reelection, these prospects were largely abated.

The anticipated Syrian–Turkish rapprochement was not the only diplomatic development related to Syria and its neighboring countries. Perhaps representing an inflection point, Syria began heavily engaging with its neighboring Arab states in May 2023, capitalizing on the momentum generated by Arab states showing an increased willingness to engage with Damascus following the 6 February earthquake. However, similar to the Syrian–Turkish rapprochement, normalization with Arab states was gridlocked shortly after readmission to the Arab League given mismatched prioritization that led to little progress in Syria's relations with its Arab neighbors and, therefore, continuity of the status quo.

Syrian–Turkish relations

The prospective revival of Syria-Turkish relations [gained prominence in early 2023](#), after [a summit convened in Moscow](#) on 28 December 2022. The Moscow summit brought together defense ministers and intelligence officials from Syria, Turkey, and Russia, thereby underscoring the geopolitical implications of rapprochement. Supplemented by [statements made by President Erdogan](#) and [subsequent meetings between high-ranking officials](#) representing all three states, observers speculated that such developments could constitute a turning point in Syrian–Turkish relations largely under Russian auspices.

Despite the potential for rapprochement to be mutually beneficial, the path towards Syrian-Turkish normalization later stagnated after Turkish President Erdogan was re-elected at the end of May. This drop in momentum is likely due to three key reasons, namely: i) Turkish elections and the politicization of Syrian refugees primarily ahead of the election, ii) both Syrian and Turkish decision-makers holding fundamentally different perspectives and inversely prioritizing issues holding up rapprochement developments, iii) the Turkish geopolitical strategy of balancing relations between both the West and Russia, taking into consideration the continuous western rejection of the unconditioned normalization with the Syrian government.

In recent years, [Syrian refugees have become a polarizing topic](#), politicized by various competing forces in the region and capitalized on as a means to reach their internal audiences and political goals. During the spring 2023 Turkish presidential campaigns, [several presidential candidates pledged](#) to return Syrian refugees to Syria to sway voters their way throughout the election as the issue grew in importance for Turkish voters. As such, President Erdogan's maneuvering before the elections could be seen as merely rhetorical and driven by electoral purposes, rather than reflecting his intent to normalize relations with Syria.

Another likely roadblock in the path to normalization was the fundamental differences between Turkey and Syria rendering the prospects for normalization bleak. Both states have inverse priorities that could facilitate normalization. For the Syrian government, the basic condition for moving on the path of rapprochement forward is [a Turkish withdrawal from northern Syria](#) and the cessation of support for opposition forces. Largely considering its presence as a matter of national security, this request was [publicly rejected by President Erdogan](#) himself.

Similar to Syria, Turkey also has several terms for Damascus. Specifically, [Turkey has four conditions](#) that must be achieved before normalizing relations with Damascus and withdrawing its army from Syria. These conditions are constitutional amendments; fair and free elections in Syria; guaranteeing a safe return for refugees; and agreeing on the future configuration for Syria's northeast areas currently held by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) whom Turkey considers to be an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a party listed as a terrorist organization in Turkey and elsewhere in the world.

By the end of 2023, what had started as a potential road to normalization ended in political parties reaching a gridlock. The lack of enthusiasm was perhaps best encapsulated during [President Bashar Al-Assad's interview in August](#), doubling down on alleged Turkish sponsorship of terrorist groups in northern Syria. Additional friction points, beyond official statements outlining prerequisites for rapprochement, likely exist between Syria and Turkey. First, the future of northwest Syrian communities - particularly displaced cohorts included in the 'evacuation' protocol between 2016 and 2020 - must be clarified not only in terms of protection, safety, and security but also in political engagement by Turkish-supported entities.



Image 1: Quartet meeting between the foreign ministers of Turkey, Syria, Russia, and Iran in Moscow (Source: [AFP via Euronews](#))

Second, mutual understanding related to economic integration and engagement will also be necessary. Turkey, for its part, has invested a substantial amount of capital into northwest Syria and will likely seek assurances that its return on investment is maintained, particularly if Turkish companies are involved in future reconstruction. Syria, seeking to rebuild its economy, could be reluctant to offer economic incentives for deep Turkish economic influence, particularly given the pre-conflict impact that Turkey's cheap imports had on Syrian industries. Third, resumption, or renegotiation, of pre-conflict water-sharing agreements, will be a significant priority for Damascus, particularly given that Turkey has constructed several dams upstream of the Euphrates River, further constraining water flow beyond the [2011 memorandum of understanding](#).

Policy positions held by Western powers such as the US¹ and [the EU in relation to Bashar Al-Assad](#) and Syrian-Turkish normalization could make progress difficult. Western States remain inherently opposed to normalization without a political solution for Syria, reaffirming a strong anti-Assad stance. The US presence in northeastern Syria and its support for the SDF, which Turkey considers to be part of a terrorist organization, also constitute an obstacle to normalization.

¹ Members of the US Congress introduced the Assad Anti-Normalization Act to deter normalization with the Syrian government, which later [passed the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 17 May](#).

Breaking Isolation: Syria's Return to the Arab League

At the onset of the February 2023 earthquakes, many Arab states reopened their political channels, with the Syrian government to provide opposition and government-held areas with much-needed humanitarian aid.² This form of humanitarian diplomacy marked the beginning of departing old policy positions that largely isolated Damascus from the Arab world since 2011. Foreign ministers from [Egypt](#), [Jordan](#), and [the UAE](#), in addition to a delegation of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union,³ [visited Damascus](#), meeting with Bashar Al-Assad, who himself was also welcomed to Oman and [UAE](#) in February and March, respectively. For Egypt and Jordan, these diplomatic visits were the first of their kind since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011; the UAE had restored diplomatic ties prior to the February 2023 earthquake.



Image 2: Assad visits the UAE in March 2023 (Source: [Reuters](#))

In a process mediated by Russia, March 2023 also saw [Saudi Arabia and Syria agree](#) to restore diplomatic relations, followed by a [Saudi invitation](#) for Bashar Al-Assad to attend the 32nd Arab League Summit held in Jeddah on 19 May after a consensus among Arab states was reached to [reinstate Syria into the Arab League](#).



Image 3: The Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union visits Damascus in 2023 (Source: [Syrian presidency telegram page](#)).

'Step-for-step': A roadmap to reintegrate Syria into the Arab world

Despite the development, readmission did not mean relations had resumed between Syria and all Arab states in full. Qatar, Morocco, Kuwait, and Yemen [initially refused Syria's readmission](#) into the Arab League, though ultimately, [did not oppose it](#). Conversely, other states such as Jordan led efforts to resolve

² The [UAE](#), [Algeria](#), [Egypt](#), [Jordan](#), [Lebanon](#), [Libya](#), [Palestine](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#) were swift to respond to the humanitarian needs of Syria making [pledges](#) and sending [cargo planes](#) carrying aid to government-controlled areas. Other Arab countries, such as [Kuwait](#), [Iraq](#), and [Oman](#), opened airspace to ensure the ongoing delivery of aid into Syria.

³ Composed of Iraq, UAE, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, and Oman

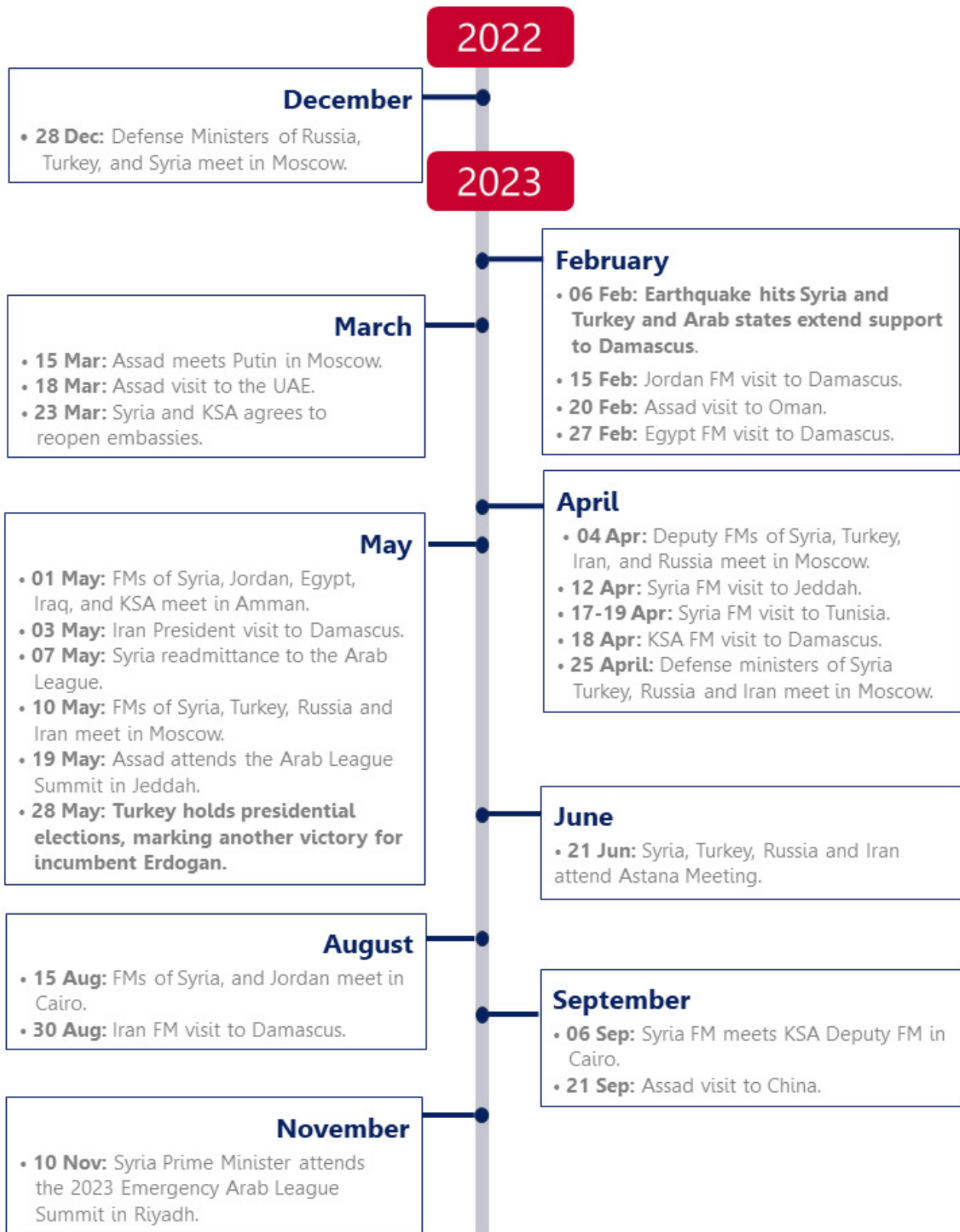


Figure 1: A timeline of events in 2023 related to diplomacy, normalization efforts, and Damascus' attempts to reintegrate within regional political structures.

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the Syrian conflict to fully reintegrate Syria into the Arab world. Jordan's initiative, dubbed as the 'Step-for-Step process,' aimed to resolve many existing grievances between Syria and several neighboring states to facilitate reintegration – likely in a process that implies, expects, or otherwise requires incremental concessions on all sides.

First discussed in late 2022, and revived following the February 2023 earthquake, the initiative set several conditional objectives that include the provision of economic assistance for Syria, lobbying for the gradual lifting of sanctions, building support for reconstruction, and engagement in a democratic political reform process. The conditions, otherwise viewed as the priorities set forth by regional actors, included ensuring the safe and voluntary return of refugees, boosting efforts to combat narcotics trafficking, satisfying UN Security Council resolution 2254, and developing strategies to strengthen security and combat terrorism. During the Arab Ministerial Liaison Committee meeting in Cairo, in August, the initiative's sponsors also agreed to resume the Constitutional Committee meetings in Oman before the end of the year; these meetings, in the end, did not occur.

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The current and future situation of the Syrian-Arab rapprochement

The Syrian government made no tangible concessions to the Arab League or Arab states on a political solution in line with the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254. While Jordan and Iraq have taken bilateral steps to reach out to the Syrian government to combat narcotics smuggling, these efforts were unequally met by the Syrian government who, on the whole, has failed to deliver on this commitment; in fact, [Jordan seized 9.3 million captagon pills](#), in addition to more than 25,000 marijuana palms, during 2023.⁶ Damascus' willingness to curb illicit narcotics smuggling remains in question, especially with high-ranking officials within the government, [members of the Assad family](#), [Iran](#), and [Hezbollah](#) reportedly retaining some role in the trade itself, which also raises questions as to whether the government could successfully curb the trade or if it intends to.

The same could be said for the other pledges. Concerning the Constitutional Committee meetings, there is a justified doubt whether the Syrian government will participate in the peace process in good faith, with any intention of sharing power. For years, the [Syrian government has been accused of purposefully obstructing any negotiations](#). In terms of refugees, despite Bashar [Al-Assad stating that refugees are welcome](#) to return, he also noted that the lack of infrastructure and services are likely to be [impediments to return](#), mimicking the same tone taken with Turkey in setting inverse priorities; Al-Assad also emphasized an end to economic isolation and aid for facilitating refugee returns while Arab states inversely emphasize facilitating returns in return for economic aid.

4 Jordan hosted a consultative meeting in Amman, with the foreign ministers of Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Syria on 1 May. The consultative meeting came as a follow-up of the [Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\) meeting](#) in Jeddah on 14 April to discuss the possibility of Syria's return to the Arab League. Diplomats in the meeting reportedly stressed the "importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis."

5 This committee was set up by the UN as part of the Syrian peace process to reconcile Damascus with opposition actors by renewing the Syrian Constitution.

6 As a prime example, the Jordanian army confronted attempted cross-border smuggling operations in December 2023. Armed confrontations with smugglers lasted a reported 14 hours while the Jordanian military conducted several air strikes against locations used by the drug dealers in Dar'a and As-Sweida. In the end, the Jordanian military killed many of the smugglers while arresting nine, in addition to confiscating a large quantity of narcotics and weapons.

Since the start of the Syrian-Arab rapprochement, the government's traditional ally, Iran, has been wary of giving up its influence and relations with the Syrian government, ceding the arena to the Arab countries; in fact, Iran continues to send various officials to Syria to enhance cooperation between the two parties and securing Iranian interests in Syria.⁷ This phenomenon will likely offset Syria's normalization with Arab normalization as it potentially contradicts second-order priorities set by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other regional states seeking to curb Iranian influence in Syria. Assad, in turn, also [stressed Syria's commitment to its alliance with Iran](#), indicating that he does not see the possibility of the "weak" Syrian-Arab relations to be an alternative to Syria's ties to Iran.

In reality, Al-Assad continues attempting to balance a diplomatic tightrope, juggling to secure the interests and backing of historical allies such as Iran while striving to diversify his regional ties. However, Iranian entrenchment in Syria possesses the ability to offset such goals. This is perhaps best captured in Syria's role in the recent Israeli war on Gaza. Iran-affiliated armed actors retained their de-facto control in several areas, operating at times against the interests of the Syrian government. Despite [the UAE's public warning Syria not to get involved in the hostilities](#), several missiles have been fired from government-held areas towards the occupied Golan Heights in what could largely be construed as an example of Iranian influence in Syria. For its part, Israel has intensified its targeting since October, particularly of the Syrian airports in Damascus and Aleppo and other infrastructure allegedly utilized by Iran and its affiliated groups in Syria; Israel has also targeted high-ranking commanders of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in Syria.

Thus, the once 'promising' road to normalization prompted by Syria's readmission into the Arab League now appears far-fetched. Cooperation seems limited to meetings between foreign ministers without concrete action plans, while Syrian government pledges are either unverifiable or its achievements inflated. Adding further complexity is Western powers' inherent rejection of any normalization between Arab allies and Syria, as well as heightened concern with respect to so-called Iranian proxies operating across Iraq and Syria.⁸

Political Developments Across Zones of Control

International and regional political developments impact not only Syria's external relationships but also the power dynamics between Syria's dominant political actors across various zones of control. In general, power dynamics and relationships between the Syrian government, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) are convoluted in ways that prevent peace and stability from prospering. In many ways, each actor possessed levers that effectively balance each other out. These configurations, however, are impacted by regional and international shifts such as those mentioned above, at least partially. Reflecting on the onset of the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement, the government's path to normalization with Arab states, and other developments, this section outlines how relationships between Syria's dominant actors were impacted.

Government–SSG/SIG Relations

In 2023, a potentially consequential development unfolded, ostensibly affording the Syrian government the potential to wield influence over the SSG and SIG. In July, the UN Security Council failed to extend the mechanism originally [established in 2014](#) that allowed the delivery of aid through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey⁹ without the consent of the Syrian government, threatening to cut off an aid pipeline that [ushers in 85% of opposition-held northwest Syria's aid](#). Despite the UNSC gridlock, the

7 The most important of these visits was that of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Syria on May 3-4, when many cooperation agreements were signed

8 The White House [notified its Arab allies that the Caesar sanctions remain](#) in place, and the US would not consider normalization. Other EU member states also maintained a similar position.

9 The UN Security Council adopted [Resolution 2672 in January 2023](#), extending the delivery of UN cross-border aid into Syria for six months until July 2023.

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Syrian government, in July, allowed the UN to use Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salama, and al-Rai crossings for aid delivery within the framework of a bilateral understanding between the UN and the Syrian government under the latter's conditions in what was ultimately dubbed as the 'consent model.'

The new model allowed the UN access to the crossings for three months for Bab al-Salama and al-Rai and six months for Bab al-Hawa which were to be renewed based on consent provided by the Syrian government. Though the [government renewed its consent](#) for another six months on 12 January, the UN's sole reliance on aid delivery based on the conditions outlined by [the government's decision on 13 July](#) that govern the cross-border mechanism largely raises concerns.

Some conditions, such as zero communication with opposition groups and allowing the SARC to facilitate and distribute aid in the northwest, are generally unworkable requirements. Coupling these unworkable conditions with operational realities effectively, yet thus far hypothetically, empowers the Syrian government to renege on its consent. For instance, seeking to coordinate with a local partner to ensure the safe passage of aid through Bab al-Hawa, the UN is reportedly coordinating with the recently established Humanitarian Action Coordination Office (HAC). While there is no official link between the

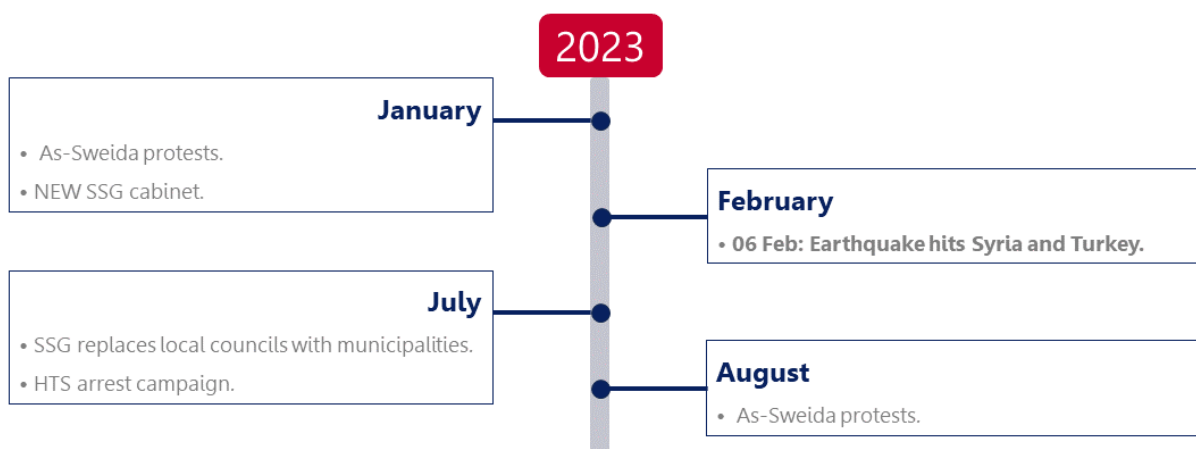


Figure 2: A timeline of events in 2023 related to domestic political dynamics, both across and within specific zones of control

two parties, HAC is perceived to be an extension of the opposition's SSG in what could be deemed by the Syrian government as a violation of its conditions and potentially withdraw its consent, or decide against renewing it in future rounds. Complications between Turkey and the Syrian government could also potentially complicate aid delivery.

As a result, the consent model potentially renders access to aid from Turkey as a major lever for the Syrian government to utilize in the medium term in negotiations not only with armed actors but also with Turkey (who [remains keen to maintain the flow of aid](#) to avoid further instability on its border) and the international community. In terms of implications, depending on how the international community navigates the Syrian government's authorizations – and how Damascus utilizes authorization as a lever – access conditions to the northwest could continue to incrementally tighten, to the detriment of local communities.

Government–AANES Relations

Traditionally, the relationship between the Syrian government and AANES could be generally described as limited strategic [cooperation over trading crude and refined oil](#), [security cooperation](#) in relation to Turkish incursions, and lesser publicized arrangements such as the unofficial smuggling of grain from NES for the Syrian government consumption. In effect, each actor's capacity was large enough to cancel the other's strategic advantage. Regional developments revolving around Syria throughout 2023, however, potentially emboldening the Syrian government in its relationship with AANES and the SDF. The Syrian government's readmission to the Arab League and the potential for a Syrian–Turkish rapprochement in early 2023 likely send signals to AANES and the SDF of the political trajectory of the Syrian conflict moving forward, excluding AANES.

Statements and actions by high-ranking SDF and AANES officials indicated an increased willingness to cooperate as the government's regional relations developed. In April, following rumors of a potential normalization between the Syrian government and Arab states, SDF commander Mazloom Abdi told media outlets of his "[hopes that the SDF would be incorporated into the Syrian Arab Army](#)," and that the SDF maintains a relationship with the Syrian government that they would "want to develop."

Similar steps were also taken by the AANES, who [launched an initiative](#) stressing the actor's willingness to start a dialogue with the Syrian government. In a December 2023 publication, the AANES suggested a new decentralized political and administrative system within a [newly ratified social contract](#). The governing document stresses that the AANES is part of the "Democratic Republic of Syria," an obvious departure from the official 'Syrian Arab Republic' nomenclature. The social contract also indicated that the SDF is self-tasked with defending "all Syrian lands" from external attacks or imminent threats, perhaps implying an arrangement with the Syrian Arab Army is possible. It is not unforeseen that AANES and the SDF feared being left out of talks on Syria's political future amid its exclusion from these developments. As a result, much of the actions taken by the SDF and AANES' actions following the onset of these regional political dynamics could be seen as either signaling its willingness to negotiate with Damascus, or entrenching its position on an unforeseen future arrangement.

While the AANES appears to be attempting to build bridges with the Syrian government, Damascus seems to be [exploiting schisms between AANES and its residents](#), potentially influencing the future relationship between both actors. The insurgency against the SDF in Deir-ez-Zor was largely built off of pre-existing grievances between the SDF and members of Arab tribes that have been simmering for years. Though largely believed to have grown organically, reports of a [growing role for the government](#) in facilitating the development of this insurgency into the "Arab Tribal Forces" continued to emerge. Such tensions could provide the government with the near-ideal pathway to destabilize AANES-held areas, coercing AANES into potential concessions in future negotiations by having the ability to affect the trajectory and intensity of these hostilities.

As of the beginning of 2024, it is unclear whether the Syrian government can exploit apparent relational advantages with the AANES to tip the scales in its favor in the future of the relationship between the two parties. As outlined above, what was once the promising path toward normalization with Arab states and the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement is now largely at a standstill. However, as Turkish aggression on AANES-held areas remains unchecked, significantly damaging AANES infrastructure and its ability to deliver services and fuel, AANES might have lost one of the bargaining chips it had in its negotiations with the Syrian government.

These dynamics make it reasonable to expect that the AANES and SDF will continue seeking to negotiate with the government in 2024. Making this increasingly likely is the fact that the government potentially has the key to diluting the insurgency in Deir-ez-Zor, allowing the SDF to focus on security threats coming from Turkey. However, the lack of substantial – and tangible – regional normalization with the Syrian government could mean that these negotiations, though likely to continue, might not revolve around political futures, but on other issues such as the trade of [wheat, commodities](#), and [cooperation in services](#) such as education.

US presence and support provide AANES with considerable leverage in any negotiations between the AANES and the Syrian government. This leverage is likely to be the reason behind Damascus ignoring all rapprochement attempts made by the AANES, as it likely intends to dilute AANES's de-facto control over northeast Syria which the presence of the US prevents it from doing so. Conversely, AANES' initiatives and proposals for a reshaped future relationship between both parties suggest that the AANES believed that its future is being part of a unified Syria governed by one Syrian government in a decentralized political system. These initiatives by the AANES may stem from the lack of absolute confidence in the continuity of US support in the face of its enemies, especially in the face of the ongoing Turkish attacks, and thus highlight their perception of needing to form a direct alternative path with the Syrian government.

AANES–SSG/SIG Relations

In 2023, notable occurrences unfolded that could reshape the dynamics between the government, SSG/SIG, and government–AANES relations in 2024. However, the current state of AANES–SSG/SIG relations

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suggests a persistence of entrenched sentiments among all involved entities. The absence of a pragmatic approach has even resulted in the withholding of immediate aid relief from local communities.

Following the February earthquake, AANES and Arab tribes located in AANES-held areas [attempted to send aid convoys](#) to earthquake-affected SSG and SIG-held areas. While the SIG and the Syrian National Army (SNA) welcomed aid provided by Arab tribes, aid sent by AANES was outwardly rejected, amid the SIG and SSG accusing AANES of trying to exploit the disaster to achieve political goals. Interestingly, in ways that showcase the complexities of these relationships intersecting with aid provision, both the SSG and SIG allowed the entry of aid provided by a foundation affiliated with AANES's Iraqi Kurdish rival, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the [Barzani Charity Foundation](#) coming through Turkey.

Similar to the Syrian government, the SIG and the SNA were also keen on taking advantage of the SDF's schisms with its local population in Deir-ez-Zor. Armed groups in northwest Syria originally belonging to the tribes fighting the SDF mobilized, [fighting directly against the SDF in Menbij](#) and the border areas between the two regions. These tensions are also reflected by the exchange of near-daily shelling between the opposition SNA factions and the SDF in Menbij and Tall-Refaat.

The Turkish-backed SIG/SNA generally shared Turkey's anti-AANES position, and therefore they were keen to deprive the AANES of exploiting the disaster to gain legitimacy, and even maintain hostilities towards AANES. It is thus clear that the future of the relationship between the opposition and the SIG/SSG are fundamentally linked to Turkey's AANES policy, meaning that these tensions are likely to continue in 2024.

SSG–SIG Relations

In 2023, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the SSG continued attempts to extend their soft and military power into SIG areas as the race for power consolidation carried on. Following the earthquake, amid continued delays by SIG to respond to urgent civilian needs, HTS and the SSG rushed to send rescue teams to the severely damaged SIG-held city of Jandairis in what ultimately saw [HTS Commander-in-Chief, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, visiting Jandairis](#) – representing a clear challenge to SIG and SNA authority.

HTS also sought to exploit the fragmented structure of the SNA, building alliances with many SNA factions to extend their influence. These efforts date back to 2022 when [HTS intervened militarily](#) on more than one occasion. In September 2023, HTS employed this tactic once again, [supporting the Al-Shahba Gathering](#) in their confrontations against the SNA Second Corps. HTS was able to guarantee its interests in northern Aleppo by strengthening the role of its allies in the Al-Shahba Gathering through their alliance with two of the largest SNA factions, under the name of the Unified Forces.¹⁰

HTS's aims are still unclear but are likely three-fold. Firstly, through attempting to expand its influence, HTS is likely attempting to take control over lucrative oil routes to increase its revenues. Second, by limiting SIG's presence, HTS could cement its position as the only legitimate representative of opposition groups. Third, and related to the second aim, by incorporating SNA factions into its ranks, HTS can ward off potential competitors and threats. Though both are linked to Turkey, Turkey can exert considerably greater influence over the SNA and SIG as opposed to HTS. Therefore, by removing or limiting SNA and SIG influence in northern Aleppo, HTS forces its way into the calculus of any potential developments related to Syria's future trajectory. This aim is particularly important to HTS and ferments itself in other ways, as will be discussed below.

Internal Political Developments

Political complexities throughout 2023 were not only across zones of control but also within. Political actors either failed to address social grievances and overall instability to respond to resident's needs or continued to witness structural changes and what appears to be a power struggle to secure dominance. For instance, political dynamics throughout 2023 in government-held areas personify the inability of the government or civilian protest movements to bring forward socio-economic change.

10 Including Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah and the Al-Mu'tasim Division

Equally, the AANES remains unable to mitigate and dilute many of the grievances held by residents towards it, effectively creating pockets that could be exploited by other actors to destabilize the region. In northwest Syria, the SIG's continued decentralized approach renders it highly dependent on Turkish authorities, while the SSG's continued centralization, amid ongoing competition between actors, threatens to sway international aid actors away from operating in Idlib and other areas under SSG rule. Below are key highlights depicting the themes mentioned above.

Government-held areas

The protests in As-Sweida triggered in August were driven by the deteriorating economic conditions. Starting with opposing the [government's increasing of fuel prices and subsidy removal](#), the protests later started calling on the [implementation of UNSCR 2254](#) and bringing forward political change in Syria, garnering attention and support from religious and [community leaders](#). For example, Sheikhs Hikmat al-Hijri, Youssef Jarbou', and Hammoud Hinnawi [openly supported the protests](#); Al-Hijri was later declared leader of the protests. Rhetorical support also poured out from [bedouin tribes](#) and local armed factions (including Qouwat Sheikh al-Karam and Harakat Rijal al-Karama, garnereing attention from Western states such as the US and the [United Kingdom](#)). To the surprise of many, residents in government-held Lattakia, Tartous, Aleppo, and Rural Damascus also joined in the protests, criticizing the government on social media. However, these sentiments were later [diffused by stick-and-carrot measures, including arrests and salary increases](#).



Image 4: As-Sweida protest in the latter half of 2023 (Source: [Hona](#))

Such measures and others such as negotiations and attempts to disincentivize collective action through demonizing protest leaders, and co-opting Druze leaders were largely unsuccessful in As-Sweida.¹¹ Despite these developments, the protests did not force the Syrian government to respond to their demands. The long duration of the protests and the events in Gaza potentially served as a distraction, decreased the number of participants in these protests, and enabled the government to ignore them without seeing a need to respond to their demands.

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SIG-held areas

Internal political dynamics in SIG-held areas remain ridden with weak governance structures, coupled with infighting among armed groups fueled by competition over resources. Northern Aleppo areas are under direct Turkish influence through the SIG.¹² The SIG's role in managing these areas is weak compared to the Turkish role, which directly supervises the management of these areas through the Turkish border

11 The government succeeded in convincing Druze Sheikhs outside of As-Sweida, particularly in Jabal al-Sheikh and Jaramana, to express their disapproval of the protests in As-Sweida and their demand for Assad's resignation. Sheikh al-Hijri's public contact with foreign officials and [his decision to welcome](#) the anti-government [Hizb al-Liwaa al-Souri](#) that is accused of [receiving Israeli funding](#) supported the government's message.

12 The SIG is considered by Turkey and the West as the legitimate political representative of the Syrian opposition.

provinces that overlook the local councils' work in the region. The SIG's local councils' weakness was clear during their response to the earthquake. The local councils were slow in responding due to the lack of timely Turkish guidance, instruction, or support due to their engagement in responding to the earthquake impacts in their areas. The SNA suffers from disintegration and ongoing disputes and competition within its ranks over influence and resources, in addition to HTS' ambition to expand its influence on SNA areas.

The ongoing interventions by HTS in northern Aleppo and its attempts to expand its influence in the region since 2022 have prompted the SIG\SNA to try to rearrange the SNA ranks. At the beginning of the year, the SNA announced new organizational steps within its ranks to eliminate the causes of disagreement between its factions. The most important of these was unifying the management of checkpoints and crossings to be under the control of the military police affiliated with the SIG Ministry of Defense in January. This decision also included establishing a fund to collect revenues from the crossings and distribute them to the factions to stop competition for the resources of these crossings. The most important crossing is the Al-Hamran crossing, which is the only crossing for fuel coming from the northeast. The SIG Ministry of Defense succeeded in handing over some checkpoints to the military police, but developments during the year indicated a failure to implement the announced steps, through the continuation of armed clashes between SNA factions where some of them allied with HTS to guarantee their interests, in addition to the continued insecurity within the region.

SSG-held areas

In Idleb and areas of western Aleppo, HTS controls the region's security and military matters, while the SSG (often accused of being the political extension of HTS) manages services, humanitarian, and economic matters. For years, both actors have sought to present themselves to the international community as efficient actors in the realm of security, governance, and the humanitarian sector. Despite these endeavors, HTS's classification as a terrorist group has prevented HTS and the SSG from reaching this goal.

Nevertheless, throughout 2023, the SSG continued strengthening its governance apparatus in its attempts to present itself as a reliable, palatable partner. For instance, almost immediately after the February 2023 earthquake, the [SSG established the Emergency Response Committee and then the Directorate of Earthquake Victim Affairs](#), which sought to partner with humanitarian response actors by providing them with publicly available information related to earthquake victims, needs, and locations. In July, in what was described as an attempt to enhance overall service provision, the SSG completely revamped local administrative structures, abolishing local councils and [replacing them with municipalities](#). This move was not a mere name change but was viewed as stronger SSG centralization; changes to the mandates were also introduced, stripping municipalities of much of the burdensome responsibilities that were once handled by local councils, outsourcing many of them to other SSG ministries and private entities in hopes that private sector engagement would bring in greater efficiency.

These efforts, coupled with the other SSG attempts at developing its administrations over the years, proved successful – at least in relative terms of control and governance. Compared to the SIG, the SSG was relatively much quicker and capable of responding to the earthquake. Despite these successes, the fact that the SSG continues to centralize its apparatuses is a cause of concern for humanitarian organizations. The SSG did not only change mandates for municipalities but also changed how the heads are appointed. Previously, heads of local councils were either elected or appointed by their local communities. Currently, SSG central authorities have taken on that responsibility. In light of constant accusations of being controlled by HTS, the SSG is risking alienating donors and the international community from engaging in its areas of control.

Throughout the year, HTS also followed a similar 'reformation' strategy. Following suit on its attempt (whether meaningful or for appearances) to shed linkages [with Al-Qaeda in July 2016](#), HTS continued attempting to purge its ranks from many individuals classified as terrorists in [a bid to rid its proscription as a foreign terrorist organization](#) to gain further international recognition. Since 2020, HTS has clashed with extremist groups such as Hurras Ad-Din to limit their presence in HTS-controlled areas. In 2023, in the context of potential Syrian-Turkish normalization, HTS leadership is consolidating greater power by removing individuals from its ranks with ties to potential competitors. HTS conducted large-scale arrest campaigns that affected [key figures such as Abu Maria al-Qahtani](#) (known as the second highest ranking member in HTS) in what potentially served the dual purpose of relinquishing ties to well-known terrorists.

The extent to which these efforts will bear fruit remains to be seen, especially as the trajectory of Syria's political future remains ambiguous. For now, however, it seems that the palatable options for the international community beyond the status quo are elusive. Coupled with a recognition that the humanitarian situation remains insufferable, humanitarian actors remain keen on facilitating aid flow into HTS/SSG-held areas, at times even coordinating with allegedly SSG-affiliated institutions such as the HAC.

HTS' efforts are unlikely to change the international perception regarding its proscription or legitimacy in the areas under its control. International understandings, especially Turkish-Russian cooperation, will likely play a decisive role either in allowing HTS to play a role in the future of the region or removing it from the scene to ensure the implementation of possible Russian-Turkish agreements in northwestern Syria. In light of the current international dynamics, the Russian preoccupation with the Ukrainian war, and the lack of the US desire or motivation to change its policy towards Syria, especially with the approaching US presidential elections at the end of 2024, and the ongoing war in Gaza, it is not expected that 2024 will bring a substantial change in the status quo in northwest Syria.

AANES-held areas

Headlining political dynamics in 2023 within AANES-held areas are continued tensions between residents of AANES-held Deir-ez-Zor and the SDF. These year-old simmering tensions resurfaced in 2023, topped by the growth of what appears to be an insurgency in Deir-ez-Zor. On several occasions, the AANES and SDF failed to resolve complex issues that risk further spreading feelings of alienation among residents that could be capitalized on by external actors.

[Tensions escalated between the Deir-ez-Zor Military Council](#) (DMC), the primary security actor in Deir-ez-Zor, and the SDF throughout July, ultimately leading to violent clashes toward the end of the month. A leaked voice recording of the DMC leader, Ahmed Al-Khabayl (known as Abu Khawla), sparked these events on 19 July. In the recording, Abu Khawla spoke of disagreements between the DMC and the SDF's Central Command, the Internal Security Forces, and local governance structures set up by the Autonomous Administration in Deir-ez-Zor over what he explained were attempts to 'control' the DMC.

Though both sides [agreed on a ceasefire at the end of August](#), tensions resurfaced in September [when the SDF arrested the DMC leader](#). Local tribal leaders, such as the leader of the Ekeidat tribal confederation, Ibrahim al-Hifil, [called on other tribes and residents to unify to fight the SDF's discriminatory practices](#), a call to which many responded positively. Attacks and clashes between the SDF and members of Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor, in what appeared to be the start of an insurgency, gained momentum; the SDF responded with force, with hostilities between the SDF and Deir-ez-Zor residents subsiding following a [US-mediated agreement](#) between both parties was reached on third of September.

[SDF and AANES officials deemed](#) the events to be part of Iranian, Syrian government, and Turkish plans to destabilize the area; however, such tensions have been simmering for years. Residents in AANES-held Deir-ez-Zor claim marginalization and disenfranchisement by AANES/SDF since the latter's establishment. The Arab tribes often felt marginalized by [a lack of service provision, rampant corruption, and lax security measures](#). These grievances came to a head after anti-SDF [local media outlets reported several violations](#) targeting civilians amid clashes between the SDF and DMC, spurring the call to arms.

Later attempts to diffuse these tensions, setting AANES-held areas in Deir-ez-Zor towards sustainable peace, were largely flawed. In October, the SDF announced an [amnesty for individuals who participated in the clashes](#) against the SDF, while AANES announced a series of reforms to Deir-ez-Zor's security and administrative bodies. Despite the initiative, local sources noted that these promises were rather broad and lacked any clear implementation roadmap, leaving residents skeptical of the genuineness of these promises.

These failed attempts arguably leave AANES vulnerable to external actors leveraging these schisms. Later in November, Ibrahim al-Hifil formally announced the creation of a unified leadership overseeing the 'Arab Tribal Forces', amid continued rumors of the government's involvement in the insurgency in Deir-ez-Zor.

Interestingly, data on [conflict patterns in Deir-ez-Zor](#) seem to support these rumors. Though the number of incidents considerably declined, many of the locations identified to have witnessed clashes between the Arab Tribal Forces and the SDF seem to [originate from government-held areas](#) in what could be perceived

as part of the [government's continued efforts to extend its influence in AANES-held areas](#) through outreach campaigns to tribal and clan leaders.

The risk of external actors attempting to increase their influence among Arab tribes in AANES-held areas is not limited to Deir-ez-Zor. Other events throughout 2023 indicate that the phenomena extend beyond that geographic scope, reaching Quamishli. In August, Abdul Qadir Hamo, leader of the government-affiliated and Iran-backed National Defence Forces (NDF), [physically assaulted Sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Muslat](#), from the al-Jabour tribe inside the city's security square. The al-Jabour tribe is a key constituency for AANES, representing the largest Arab tribe in the area. While the government was left incapable of adhering to the al-Jabour tribe's demands, and the SDF merely acted as a force aiming to preserve relative peace, it was [a Russian delegation](#) that was able to deliver on the demands set by the al-Jabour tribe, pressuring the Syrian government to conduct a military operation against the NDF leading to [Hamo's death in September](#).

Political developments throughout 2023 in AANES-held areas can be characterized by challenges faced by the AANES and the SDF in building bridges with key constituencies. This has opened the door for external actors to build influence within their areas of control. In an attempt to rectify the relationship with the Arab population, Mahmoud al-Muslat from the al-Jabour tribe was elected as the new Co-Chair for the Syrian Democratic Council in December in what could be an attempt to increase Arab tribal representation in AANES leadership. Further, the [AANES' newly ratified and published social contract](#), on 12 December, has attempted to address the fraught relationship with many tribes in NES, ensuring that judicial processes and rights are stipulated and/or reinforced. The contract also leverages notably inclusive language that transcends ethnicity, language, and origin; however, it is not clear how exactly this rhetoric is to be put into practice, whereas the impact of electing al-Muslat remains to be seen.

Outlook into 2024

Looking at Syria's political trajectory throughout 2023 offers some bleak insights for the future. Regional actors, including the Syrian government, largely failed to capitalize on the road offering the possibility to end Syria's economic and political isolation. Syria's relationship with Turkey remains fraught and unlikely to change in 2024, after President Erdogan's re-election.

By December 2023, the Syrian government, by and large, had failed (or refused) to address issues related to the narcotics trade, prompting Jordan to adopt a more hands-on approach clashing with drug traffickers along the Syrian–Jordanian border, and targeting narcotics warehouses and other facilities inside Syria with airstrikes. With [government officials from both sides blaming each other](#) for [Jordan's recent military activity](#), it becomes more apparent that the Syrian government is neither committed nor can curtail the cartel. In effect, Syria's prospects of impactful regional integration remain slim, and will likely be limited to bilateral cooperation with other states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, if any at all.

Western countries have shown their commitment to the requirement for the Syrian government to enact UNSCR 2254 as a precondition for any normalization. Therefore, there are no clear signs indicating that Western countries may change their position during the current year. This, however, could be subject to change amid upcoming presidential elections in the US and the EU parliamentary elections towards the latter half of 2024 after which policy positions might look different, albeit likely impacted by broader regional concerns related to Iran.

For the short-to-mid term, however, regional political dynamics are likely to remain. Despite that “normalization” and “rapprochement” efforts falling well short of their intended goals, and now seeming increasingly difficult, what they trickled internally in terms of actors cementing their positions is likely to continue fostering into 2024. The lack of progress on regional normalization will deny the Syrian government from having the needed resources to improve the economic situation inside its areas of control. Which in turn will cause more pressure on the residents of these areas and may trigger more areas to join the ongoing protests in As-Sweida. An expanded protest in the Syrian government areas will have limited impact in pushing the Syrian government to change its approach in dealing with the Arab countries initiative.

The SSG and HTS are expected to continue their path to gain acceptance from the international community, developing their governance structures to showcase their viability as a partner for humanitarian response

actors and purging their ranks from religious ideologues, giving more way to technocrats in their continued push to be removed from being classified as a terrorist organization. At the same time, it's expected that HTS will continue, throughout 2024, its efforts to gain more influence in the SIG\SNA areas, a goal that is needed to empower HTS's position as a main player in the future of Syria.

AANES will also continue sending signals of increased willingness to cooperate with Damascus, taking into consideration the potential US change in policy based on the coming election results. The AANES could facilitate increased cross-line trade with the Syrian government as a strategy to strengthen relations and open communication channels.

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Crisis Analysis – Syria (CA-SYR) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. CA-SYR's most important function is to collect and analyze data and information. Since 2015, our 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. CA-SYR is a team within Mercy Corps, and is part of the Mercy Corps response to the Syrian crisis.

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