

OCTOBER 2023

# SYRIA

## MONTHLY REPORT



CA - SYR

CRISIS ANALYSIS - SYRIA



This timeline provides a snapshot of key events throughout the month. These events have been selected for their impact and relevance, and do not necessarily feature as full articles in the Monthly Report.



### Regional and international updates

#### Riyadh

The Syrian Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia reopens after more than a decade, as both countries resumed their diplomatic missions. Assistant foreign and expatriates minister Ayman Sousan is appointed Ambassador to Saudi Arabia.



### Conflict and security

#### Death in the desert

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported 465 deaths since the beginning of 2023 during military operations in the Syrian desert, as follows:

- 29 ISIS members in clashes with government and Russian forces
- 276 government forces and affiliated militias in 123 operations by ISIS
- 160 civilians, including a woman, in ISIS attacks in the desert.



### Regional and international updates

#### Joint Council of Arab Gulf States and the EU

Attendees of the 27th meeting of the Joint Council of Arab Gulf States and the EU, held in Muscat, Oman expressed a commitment to resolving the Syrian conflict through a comprehensive political solution in line with a political process led by the UN.



### Humanitarian updates

#### UN suspends flights

The UN announces the temporary suspension of humanitarian flights to Syria, following an Israeli attack on Damascus and Aleppo international airports which rendered them out of service.

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### Economy and markets

#### Olive production declines

Olive production in Homs, Hama, and Lattakia declined from 2022 to 2023, based on estimates issued by the directorates of Agriculture. The decrease is attributed primarily to unfavorable weather and 'alternate bearing,' where trees produce a large crop one year followed by a lighter yield the next.

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### Humanitarian updates

#### Turkish bombardment in northern Syria

SDF leader Mazloum Abdi says that recent Turkish bombardment of northern Syria has affected the work of the Autonomous Administration, the International Coalition, and Local NGOs working towards stability. He reports the attacks hit 145 locations in 72 hours and included electricity and water stations, hospitals, and schools.

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### Services

#### Electricity prices increase in Menbij

Menbij locals complain of the increasing cost of electricity from private generators and rationing of their power. Locals pay around SYP 3,000 per ampere for household purposes and SYP 14,000 for commercial purposes. The Electricity Office in Menbij has said it may increase commercial prices.

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### Services

#### Northwest housing shortages

Rent prices are on the rise in Idlib and northwest Syria, attributed to high numbers of returnees from Turkey, and high demand for housing. Reportedly, the cheapest apartment is around \$120 per month, and too high for many.

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Government bombs devastate northwest

# Executive summary

The conflict between Israel and Palestinian militant factions threatened to spill over into Syria, with shelling reported in the occupied Golan Heights and in strategic locations in southern Syria. The newly formed Islamic Resistance in Iraq, made up of Iran-backed militias, attacked International Coalition bases in north-east Syria throughout October, eventually forcing the US to retaliate with an airstrike against facilities belonging to the militias in Deir-ez-Zor. The attacks are largely seen to be posturing by actors with geopolitical stakes in the region rather than a signal of regional escalation.

In south and central Syria, the Syrian government proposed an initial draft for its 2024 budget of SYP 35.5 trn. The budget is nominally 115% higher than the SYP 16.5 trn allocated for 2023, but 25% lower in dollar value – this is seen as Damascus' indirect acknowledgment of the steep inflation rate in 2023 and an indication of the shrinking economy. Also in government-held areas, a new organization called the National Bloc was set up in October to represent the anti-government protests in As-Sweida. It aims to unify and coordinate participants and provide a platform for discussion. The protest movement needs to regroup to regain momentum, with demonstrators flagging slightly (they have been ongoing for almost three months), and international media attention focused on the conflict in Gaza.

In northeast Syria, there have been delays in the distribution of subsidized diesel and fuel for heating. Locals are unlikely to be able to have enough to keep warm in the winter. In Deir-ez-Zor, the Syrian Democratic Forces and Autonomous Administration announced measures to address long-standing grievances between them and their residents. The Administration held a conference that included tribal and community leaders to discuss enhancing civic engagement and strengthening administrative and military structures. A closing statement pledged reforms, but failed to reveal a concrete road map to achieve them.

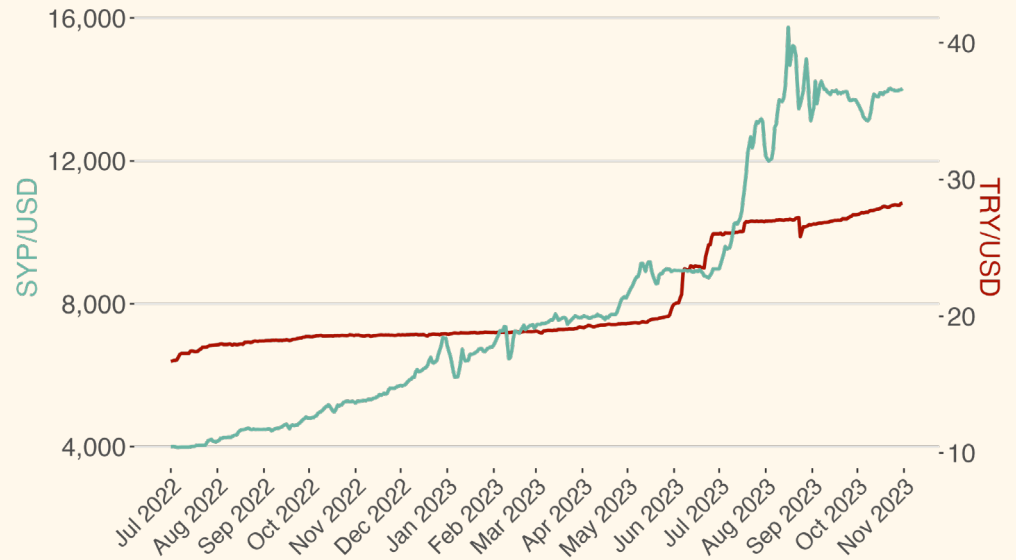
Government forces continued to bomb opposition-held areas in northwest Syria throughout October, launching strikes on vital service facilities, hospitals and schools in Lattakia, Idlib and Aleppo, killing at least 70 people, and injuring 338. Health services and education have been interrupted, economic activity was effectively shut down, and displacement is at its highest level in four years – the Syrian Salvation Government and humanitarian organizations are working hard to help residents amid funding and resource shortages.

# Economic indicators

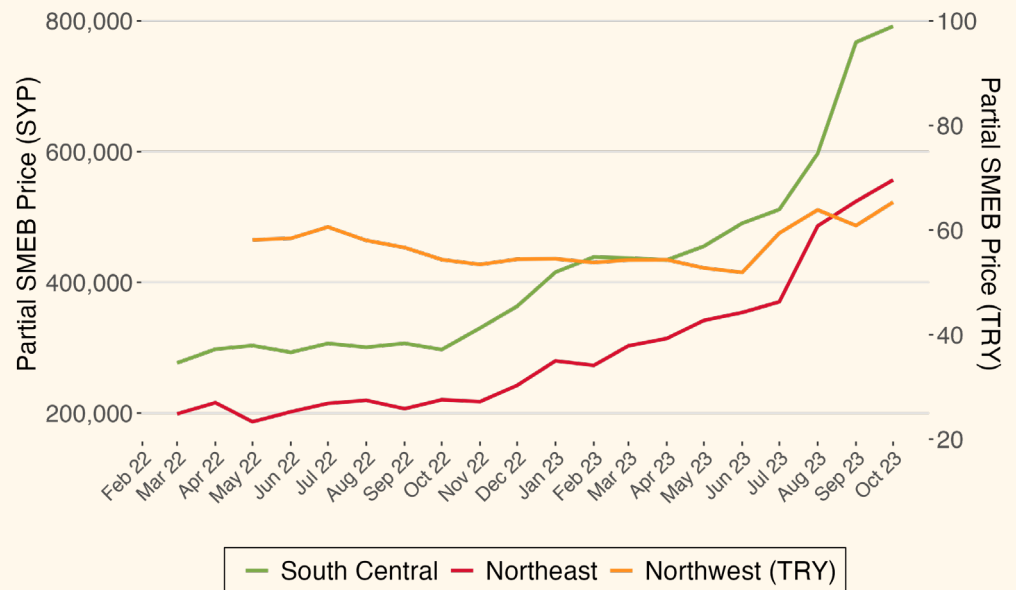
**Economic indicator 1.**  
Official and parallel market exchange rates, SYP/USD and TRY/USD

	August 2023	September 2023	October 2023
SYP/USD official exchange rate	8,585.0	8,585.0	11,500
SYP/USD parallel market rate	13,748.3 (24.4%)	13,884.0 (1%)	13,728.8 (-1.1%)
TRY/USD official rate	26.9 (1.7%)	27.0 (0.4%)	27.9 (3.2%)

**Economic indicator 2.**  
SYP/USD and TRY/USD exchange rates



**Economic indicator 3.**  
Change in partial SMEB price by zone of control. The partial SMEB price monitoring tool is in part built on Sphere recommendations of a 2100kcal daily diet per person. Items covered in the assessment include basic food items such as bread, rice, bulghur, lentils, oil, sugar, meats, vegetables, and fruit.



# International

## Gaza conflict ignites regional skirmishes in Syria

On 31 October, the UN's special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, [told](#) the Security Council that Syria was facing "a terrifying prospect of a potential wider escalation" following the start of the conflict between Israel and Palestinian militant factions on 7 October, adding that a "spillover into Syria is not just a risk; it has already begun." Throughout October, Israel retaliated to a number of attacks from Syria directed at the occupied Golan Heights. Equally, as the fighting escalated in Gaza, a number of International Coalition bases were targeted by Iran-backed militia on the Syria-Iraq border. Though these incidents are notable, they are best understood as the posturing of actors with geopolitical stakes in the region. The Syrian government itself appears to lack an appetite for conflict with Israel, at least for the moment.

### Posturing, signaling and geopolitic-ing

Iran-backed militias and the Syrian army's 4th Division reportedly deployed reinforcements to southern Syria in the [vicinity of the occupied Golan Heights](#) throughout October. The deployments were then followed by tit-for-tat attacks, with Syria firing shells and rockets toward occupied areas on three recorded occasions, and the Israeli Forces retaliating in kind, largely in [western Dar'a](#).

The Israeli Forces also conducted several airstrikes on Syria's two primary international airports, in Damascus and Aleppo, rendering them out of service. Israel claimed the attacks were pre-emptive, to prevent Iran from [moving weapons into Syria](#). The first attacks [against both airports](#) simultaneously on 12 October took place just as Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was en route to Syria from Tehran, forcing him to return to Iran. Israeli intelligence is likely to have known of the visit, with the strikes serving as a warning against involvement in response to its actions in Gaza.

International Coalition bases in northeast Syria were [attacked by Iranian-backed militias](#) more than nine times throughout October. Iranian-backed militias, operating under the umbrella of the [Islamic Resistance in Iraq](#) formed to coordinate a response to the conflict in Gaza, conducted multiple rocket and drone attacks against US forces in the [Abu Hajar airbase](#), the [Konico gas field](#), and the [al-Omar oil field](#).<sup>1</sup> The US later [retaliated](#) with airstrikes on 26 October against two Iranian ammunition and weapons facilities near Abu Kamal town. The US secretary of defense Lloyd Austin [said](#) that the "precision self-defense strikes are a response to a series of ongoing and mostly unsuccessful attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria by Iranian-backed militia groups." He also added that the US "has no intention nor desire to engage in further hostilities" if the attacks against

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1 The US military base in [al-Tanf](#) located in southeastern Syria was also attacked.

its forces stop. Iran-backed militia attacks are not new and are interpreted [as a warning](#) to the US against direct involvement in the Gaza conflict and serve to bog down US assets and [deny heavy support to Israel](#). As it stands, the actions of both sides appear to be calibrated to avoid a significant escalation for the time being, however, any miscalculation could spiral out of control.

The frequency of attacks and their potential to ignite a volatile situation should be monitored, however they are also a continuation of fractious relationships, and their significance can be overstated. In the current context, the targeting of the occupied Golan Heights and International Coalition bases are best interpreted as posturing by Iranian-backed militias, to warn Israel and the US of the potential for spillover into regional instability. Iranian-backed militias needed to show a response to the events as they unfolded in Gaza given the need to honor the anti-Israel narrative it has employed for years. However, the current [economic situation in Iran](#), coupled with other [geopolitical issues](#) the country faces indicates that Iran is unlikely to engage in a way that risks conflict at any great scale.

### Damascus lacks appetite for escalation

Despite the tit-for-tat attacks taking place on Syria's southern border and in the northeast, there does not seem to be an appetite for escalation by the Syrian government – for the time being. Damascus has not expressed a desire to get involved, unlike the Iranian-backed militias as part of the [Islamic Resistance in Iraq](#) or [Yemen's Houthi-led government](#) who declared that they have entered the conflict; the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has instead [settled on condemnation of Israel](#). The UAE has also [warned](#) Damascus not to intervene against Israel or to allow attacks to be launched from Syria; the warning is likely to be heeded, given the UAE's close relationship and outward shows of support ([through normalization efforts](#) and [humanitarian aid](#)) to the country.

Domestically, the Syrian government could be benefitting from the spotlight being on the developments in Gaza and away from its [military operations](#) against the opposition-held north and the [protests in As-Sweida](#). Also concerning is the idea that the attacks launched from government-held Quneitra and western Dar'a could be the result of Damascus' shrinking ability to control various affiliated armed groups, particularly those that have conflicting local and regional loyalties.

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# South and Central Syria

## Syrian government proposes 2024 draft budget

On 24 October, the Syrian Higher Council for Economic and Social Planning [proposed an initial draft for the 2024 budget](#), with SYP 35.5 trn allocated between SYP 26.5 trn for expenditure and SYP 9 trn for investment. Of the amount set aside for expenditure, SYP 6.2 trn will be allocated to social support and has different subcategories (shown below).

Subcategory	SYP
National Social Aid Fund	50 bn
Agricultural Support Fund	75 bn
Fuel subsidies	2,000 bn (2 trn)
Yeast	103 bn
Drought and Natural Disaster Mitigation Fund	7 bn
Transition to Modern Irrigation Fund	50 bn

Table 1: Subcategories for the 2024 budget for social support (Source: [Al-Watan Newspaper](#))

The Syrian prime minister Hussein Arnous stated that the budget will focus on revitalizing the industrial and agricultural sectors by providing them with their full funding requirements, focusing on the optimal use of resources, and investing in projects that yield a high return. He added that it will be important to focus on projects that are feasible and can be put into service easily. Using 2023 as an example, he said the implementation rate of government projects was good, at 80% for projects funded using investment spending and 100% for those funded using current spending.

### The 2024 budget, an indirect admission of inflation

The 2024 budget is approximately 115% higher in nominal terms (in Syrian pounds) than the previous year's budget, but 25% lower in its dollar value.<sup>2</sup> An increase in the nominal value of the budget is the government's indirect ac-

<sup>2</sup> The dollar value was calculated against the official exchange rate of SYP 8,585 per USD (August 2023). The pounds official exchange rate was devalued by 283% in 2023. Given Syria's monetary and financial struggles, it is likely that the official exchange rate will continue to be adjusted in reflection of a weaker pound.

knowledge of the [steep inflation](#) in 2023 – the government and the Central Bank have been grappling with the gap between the official and black-market exchange rates, eventually devaluing the pound to SYP 8,585 per USD (from SYP 3,030) as the black-market rate reached a low of over SYP 13,000 in August. The new budget has therefore been adjusted for 2023 levels of inflation and is the highest it has ever been, however in real terms, measured in dollars, is 25% lower than last year, and lower than any other year.

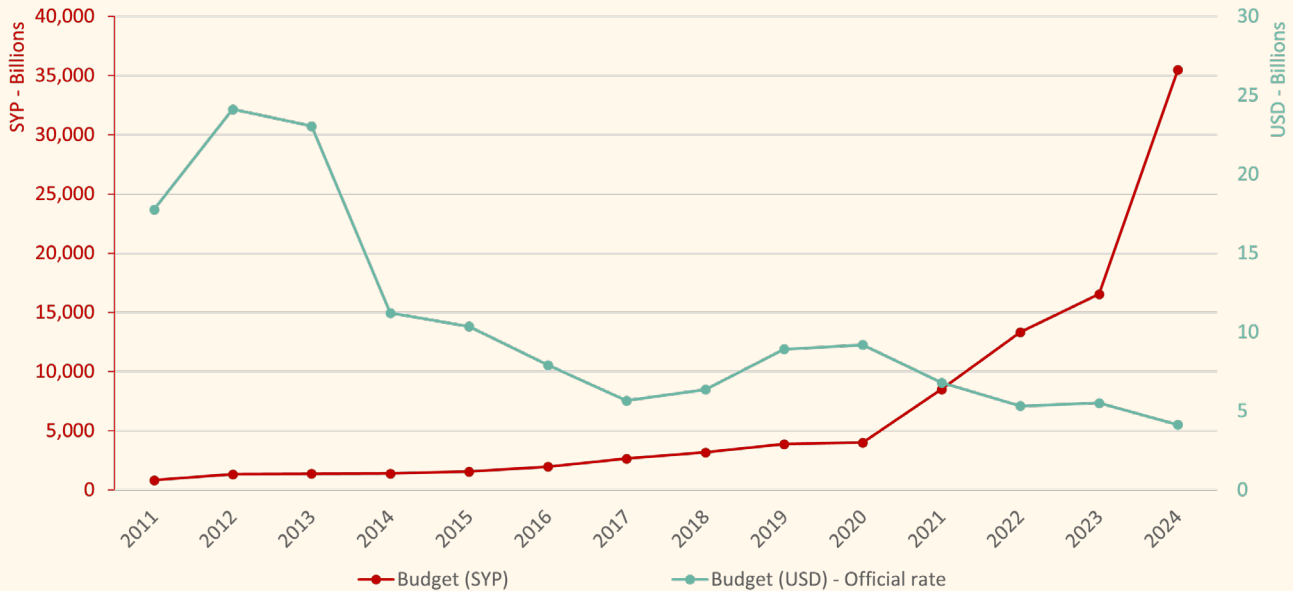


Figure 1: The SYP and approximate USD value of Syria’s budgets between 2011 and 2024 (Source: [Syria Report](#))

One way in which a larger monetary budget will aid the economy would be to enable the government to pay off its domestic debt. For example, the General Manager of the Tartous Water Company said that their only two legally sanctioned clients, the Syria Trade Establishment and the Military Social Foundation (both government institutions), have not paid the company for the water bottles they produced for them, [accumulating a debt of SYP 14 bn and SYP 4 bn](#) respectively. President of the Union of Textile Workers, Mohamad Azouz, said that the [government is unable to pay cotton farmers](#) for their produce after increasing the purchase price from SYP 4,000 to 10,000 per kilogram; the Ministry of Finance still has not provided the Public Cotton Establishment with the money it needs to buy the cotton.

### Shrinking budget, shrinking economy

In light of Syrian markets and prices responding to the unstable exchange rate, the fact that the government’s budget is lower in dollars compared to the 2023 budget means that government revenues are shrinking; many of the increased allocations in the 2024 budget in comparison to that of 2023 are a decrease in terms of dollar value. Despite a reported [increase](#) in expected revenue genera-



tion (whether from increased taxes and fees, or investment) in 2024 from SYP 11.68 to 26 trn, this projection in dollar terms is 16% lower than 2023. Similarly, while the [social support budget](#) increased from SYP 4.92 to 6.21 trillion, its share of the budget actually decreased from 29.6% to 17%, a significant reduction of support for a population that is already struggling. Lastly, despite funding allocations for many services going up (particularly for agriculture), the government has also been cutting support in other areas, most prominently for subsidies. For example, the government reportedly [reduced its expenses](#) by SYP 6 trillion in the second half of 2023 by [cutting fuel subsidies](#) further.

## Budgetary discrepancies

The budget also appears to have discrepancies. When compared to its actual value, allocations are unable to meet many of the goals highlighted by Arnous. For example, the investment budget, when considering the Central Bank's official exchange rate, is [equivalent to 25% of the 2008 investment budget](#). It is unlikely to be enough to repair public infrastructure, or improve entire economic sectors. The budget also set aside SYP 103 bn for yeast without mentioning its purpose and if it would go towards bread subsidies. The SYP 2 trn set aside for fuel subsidies is high when considering petrol subsidies have been cut and residents are only receiving 50 L of diesel for heating. The numbers placed in the budget thus far show that the government might not be able to meet all of its objectives and could point to potentially wasteful spending of resources and corruption.

## National Bloc created to coordinate As-Sweida protests

On 23 October, a new civil body called the National Bloc was [announced](#) in As-Sweida. Activists say the Bloc's formation is a step towards organizing and diversifying collective action with the inclusion of different stakeholders and residents throughout the governorate's various communities. The [announcement](#) claims the Bloc does not have any political affiliation, that it represents part of the protest movement, that it supports peaceful protests, and that it has elected delegates in the different protest locations to make the protests more intertwined. The Bloc was also [formed](#) as a way to unify efforts, further organize the movement, and provide a platform for discussing important issues to help maneuver through this critical period. Local media sources [stated](#) that it was formed after a series of meetings that included representatives of many stakeholders and communities in the governorate.

The National Bloc was formed after more than 60 days of protests across the governorate, with larger ones held in As-Sweida city's public squares every Friday. With the drawn-out duration of the protests, in addition to the events in Gaza serving as a distraction, it is likely to have become clear that there was a need for a group to organize protestors and maintain momentum. Local sources added that the number of participants in the Friday protests has decreased to approximately 1,700 protestors compared to the thousands that attended be-

fore the start of the [conflict](#) in Gaza. Protestors fear that losing international interest and support could eventually lead to the protests dying out.

However, many are still working hard to keep the momentum going. Local sources stated that a tent was erected in the public square to provide cover from rain while also serving as a physical symbol of the protestors' intentions to keep their demonstrations active. Protestors have been hard at work to establish an organization that represents them collectively and propagates their demands. The protests have yielded largely rhetorical and incremental results throughout September and early October, prior to the events in Gaza, which have encouraged the movement to continue. For example, [foreign officials contacted Sheikh Kikmat al-Hajari](#), the movement's de facto leader, throughout September giving the protests international recognition. Additionally, a [call between Sheikh Ahmad al-Sayasna and Sheikh al-Hajari](#) took place on 5 October and highlighted solidarity between Dar'a and As-Sweida residents, making it more difficult for the government to sow division between residents of southern Syria.<sup>3</sup>

### Keeping the momentum going

The National Bloc is the latest in a series of proposed organizations that have tried to represent the protests since mid-August. On 27 August, a group of retired military officers [proposed setting up a 'Temporary Civil Administration'](#) to administer the governorate's affairs and open a border crossing with Jordan during their visit to Sheikh al-Hajari. They were later faced with a huge [backlash](#) for their proposal which was used by pro-government media as proof that the protests were part of a foreign conspiracy against Syria. The 'Political Entity for National Action' was then [announced](#) in As-Sweida city's public square on 15 September during a protest, allegedly in coordination with Sheikh al-Hajari. They aimed to [provide a clear political view](#) of Syrians' demands for political change and a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict. A Social Entity was also announced in conjunction that aimed to coordinate and cooperate with religious leaders and key stakeholders. However, both entities reportedly failed.

The attempts at forming an organization that represents the protests have failed for several reasons. The governorate's prominent religious leaders have not expressed support for these movements. Local sources said that Sheikh al-Hajari is allowing their formation but refusing to fully support them because this move could be considered an escalation towards the Syrian government. The protestors in As-Sweida still do not agree on many of the main points, hindering their ability to form an organization that is representative of them. Protestors are currently divided between those who support the traditional opposition activists

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<sup>3</sup> Sheikh al-Sayasna is a prominent opposition figure and religious leader in Dar'a where he served as the Sheikh of al-Omari mosque in Dar'a al-Balad (where the protests began). During the phone call, Sheikh al-Sayasna said that Dar'a residents were 'ready to thwart any attempt to sow division' and emphasized the importance of unity among residents in southern Syria. This is a major obstacle for the government's attempts to [spark conflict between the residents of both governorates](#) given Sheikh al-Sayasna's standing in Dar'a.

and those who support Hizb al-Liwaa al-Souri.<sup>4</sup> This division is reflected in the National Bloc's statement that they represent "[part of the protest movement](#)" and its leadership under Atef Hneidi, a traditional opposition activist close to Sheikh al-Hajari. Local sources also noted that Hizb al-Liwaa al-Souri formed a similar organization called the Syrian National Bloc led by [Sheikh Marwan Kiwan](#). While the formation of such an organization is necessary for the protesters to unify efforts and interact with domestic and foreign stakeholders more efficiently, it is unlikely to be a success without the full support of As-Sweida's religious leadership, particularly Sheikh al-Hajari, and without the support of all protesters.



*Photo: Anti-government protesters in As-Sweida governorate. August 2023 (Source: Suwayda 24, via Reuters).*

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<sup>4</sup> Hizb al-Liwaa al-Souri is an anti-government political party that was formed in July 2021 that [claims](#) to be opposed to corruption and the expansion and presence of Iran-backed militias in As-Sweida and Syria. They reportedly formed the anti-government militia named "Counter Terrorism Forces" who have clashed with pro-government militias on several occasions in 2021.

# Northeast Syria

## Administration falls short in winterization efforts

Families in northeast Syria are expected to face tough winter conditions following delays in the distribution of subsidized diesel used for heating reported throughout the month.<sup>5</sup> Though shortages were reported throughout northeast Syria, the severity differed between areas. In Al-Hasakeh city, Autonomous Administration [officials](#) told media outlets on 23 October that 18,553 out of 93,000 (approximately 20%) registered families received their allocations. Similar shortages were reported in Ar-Raqqa and Quamishli, and local sources in Deir-ez-Zor also reported shortages, though less acutely. These shortages are expected to have implications on residents' capabilities to secure their needs, but also on humanitarian actors who could face a situation where the number of people in need of winterization aid increases.

### Resource shortages and disruptions to supply cause delays

A number of factors, both novel and common, seem to have contributed to the delays in the delivery of diesel for heating this year. For instance, Autonomous Administration [officials](#) and local sources in Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli have attributed large parts of the delays to the recent Turkish military campaign, with attacks on critical infrastructure including oil fields in the first week of [October](#). Demographics and population density in Al-Hasakeh and Quamishli have also reportedly had a role in these delays. Local sources noted these more acute delays in populous urban city centers in comparison to rural areas, attributing the delays to the limited amount of distribution points and fuel tanks relative to the areas' population density.

In Ar-Raqqa, local and [media sources](#) attributed the delays to issues related to registration and the difficulties for some in accessing personal identification documents. Registering for subsidized heating fuel allocations reportedly involved a process of submitting personal identification papers revealing the total number of immediate family members within a household. In Ar-Raqqa, many [reportedly](#) have difficulties in accessing those documents and therefore receiving their allocations. In May 2023, the Ar-Raqqa Civic Council [announced](#) the formation of 30 teams to carry out a new census that [aims](#) to establish a database containing household data to organize several social support mechanisms including the distribution of fuel allocations, bread, and other forms of aid. By August 23, the second round of the census covering rural areas near Ar-Raqqa city was announced, but it is yet to be completed according to statements made by Ar-Raqqa [officials](#) on October 23 contributing to the overall delay. At the time of writing, it remains unclear whether this database will be made public.

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<sup>5</sup> In Northeast Syria, families who register to receive heating fuel subsidies are allocated 300 liters each, at the price of SYP 325 per liter.

### Implications for winter

Though these delays are not new, the economic challenges facing northeast Syrian households ahead of the 2023–2024 winter season are arguably the greatest they are yet to face. Similar to other regions in Syria, the depreciation of the Syrian pound against the dollar continued to reach new lows. For instance, in Al-Hasakeh, the Syrian pound depreciated by approximately 59% from December 2022 to October 2023, significantly increasing prices and depleting household purchasing power.

Studies published in late October revealed that the price of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket bulk foods in northeast Syria [increased](#) by approximately 40% between July and August 2023. The decreasing flow of US dollars from Iraq into northeast Syria could have been a reason behind the spike, but if not, will likely contribute to further price hikes in the future. Deplorable economic conditions faced by Syrians in northeast Syria are expected to be compounded further amid a [decision](#) by the Autonomous Administration to increase fuel prices in September and a [drop](#) in the estimated average daily wage for unskilled labor from \$2 to \$1.5 in the northeast between June and August 2023.

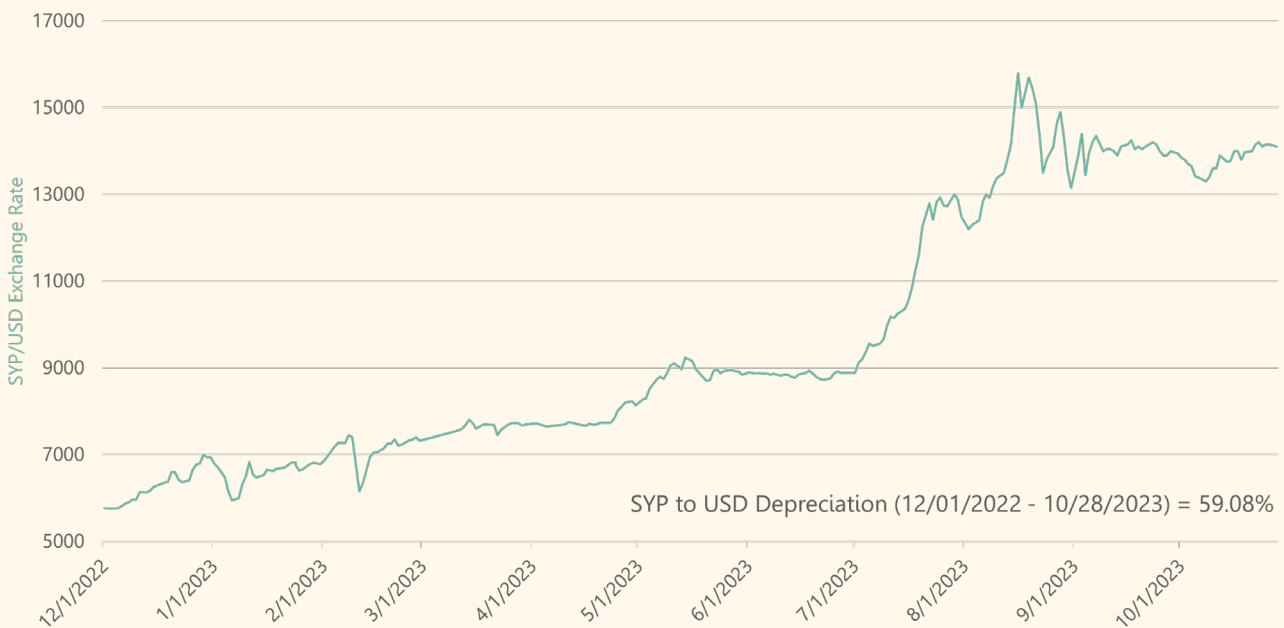


Figure 2: Depreciation of the Syrian pound against the USD in Al-Hasakeh (Source: [SP-Today](#))

The deteriorating economic conditions only mean that households are in greater need this year for subsidized fuel. Local sources remain skeptical that the Autonomous Administration will be able to distribute all the allocations before winter hits. As a result, people will struggle to find means to keep warm, which could contribute to negative coping mechanisms, including burning hazardous waste (and the health implications of this), and increased borrowing. This is likely to negatively impact the overall economic outlook into 2024 as they head into the year with greater debt.

## SDF and the Autonomous Administration build bridges in Deir-ez-Zor



Photo: "Enhancing security and stability towards developing and consolidating participatory cooperation in Deir ez-Zor" conference (Source: [Hawar News](#))

Following the clashes that took place between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and residents of Deir-ez-Zor in [August](#) and [September](#) 2023, the SDF and Autonomous Administration announced a number of measures to address long-standing grievances between residents in the area and the SDF. While some of the initiatives proposed by the Autonomous Administration look promising, many factors risk them falling short of their intended objectives.

### Reforms and settlement procedures

On 20 October, the SDF [extended](#) the amnesty period originally [announced](#) on September 28 for individuals who participated in the fighting against the SDF by 15 days. According to the SDF's [statement](#), over 100 individuals have already taken part in this process, officially resettling their status, giving up their weapons and receiving amnesty. The granting of amnesty should be viewed positively, and as a means to dampen hostilities towards the SDF. However, there is also no 'quick fix' solution. The relatively low numbers – as many hundreds participated in clashes against the SDF – are indicative of the lack of trust in the process and the SDF, arguably augmented by a number of [arrest campaigns](#) launched since hostilities subsided. The continued targeting of SDF checkpoints and the [subsequent](#) curfew announced by the SDF on 16 October is also indicative that tensions remain, albeit at a different level of intensity.

Other measures included a series of reforms to Deir-ez-Zor's administrative bodies in an attempt to address societal rifts. On 22 October, the Autonomous

Administration held a [conference](#) with representatives of Deir-ez-Zor including tribal leaders, lawyers and other prominent members of the community. The conference, called 'Enhancing Security And Stability Towards Developing And Consolidating Participatory Cooperation In Deir Ez-Zor' was [aimed](#) at enhancing civic engagement to strengthen administrative and military structures in Deir-ez-Zor, and concluded with a 42-point closing statement revolving around administrative and security reforms in the governorate, among other pledges.

Though these steps are in the right direction for the Autonomous Administration toward building bridges with Deir-ez-Zor communities, they still fall short of changing perceptions in any meaningful way. For instance, the structural reforms promised during the conference related to Deir-ez-Zor's civil administrations were just that – promises, with a six-month deadline and no further commitment to action. According to local sources, many hold little hope that the reforms will be anything more than a cabinet reshuffle.

Promises of reforms to Deir-ez-Zor's security configurations were equally vague, as the Autonomous Administration did not reveal a concrete road map to achieve that end, nor did it emphasize what it intends to do. However, reports later revealed what could be the SDF's attempt at strengthening its control over the Deir-ez-Zor Military Council (DMC). On 24 October, local and media outlets [reported](#) that many members from the DMC were dismissed, and others were denied salaries for two months as collective punishment for being involved in violence against the SDF (such as the Hajin Military Council). Other individuals, for example those affiliated with the Military Square in Sur which reportedly helped the SDF Central Leadership control the town, did not face the same punishment.

The SDF's moves to secure loyalty and control could also provide protection from the reported risk of involvement of Syrian government and Iran-backed forces against the SDF. Consequently, the SDF's latest dismissals could be an attempt to remove groups within the DMC it considers a potential threat to the area's overall security. The diverging approaches adopted by the SDF to deal with various groups within the DMC are largely reflective of the complexities of the council's structure. Local sources noted that DMC's structure in northern, central and western SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor is different from its structure in eastern SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor. In northern, central, and western SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor, the DMC is primarily composed of brigades that also contain members of central SDF leadership and other security branches such as the SDF intelligence.

Meanwhile in eastern SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor, the DMC's structure is composed of smaller military councils operating under the DMC's umbrella. Unlike the brigades in other areas of SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor, local sources noted that the smaller military councils are largely composed of locals from the area. In essence, smaller military councils within the DMC operate with greater relative independence as opposed to the brigades that are under tighter SDF central control, and are, by extension, perceived to be under greater Kurdish control as opposed to local Arab leadership.

These differences not only explain the disparate loyalties towards the SDF, but also indicate the potential repercussions that might surface from efforts to re-

form the DMC. According to local sources, despite perceiving the DMC's former leadership as corrupt, many in Deir-ez-Zor also perceived it to be the only Arab-led body in Deir-ez-Zor. Other bodies, such as the Deir-ez-Zor Civic Council, are largely believed to be heavily influenced by Kurdish advisors (also known as Kadros) appointed by central Autonomous Administration bodies.

### Paradox for SDF

In light of the new DMC leadership yet to be appointed, and several reports indicating the SDF's continuous arrest campaigns, many fear that reforming the DMC will only enable greater central SDF, or Kurdish, control over the region rendering the Autonomous Administration's efforts to build bridges with Deir-ez-Zor residents deficient. As a result, the SDF and Autonomous Administration continue to find themselves in the difficult position of needing to tighten security to dissuade attacks, however in doing so further disenfranchise non-supporters, and increase the risk of attacks.

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# Northwest Syria

## Government bombs devastate northwest

Syrian government forces [continued](#) their intensive airstrikes against opposition-held areas in northwest Syria throughout October. The bombing started on 5 October as a response to an explosion at a government Military Academy in Homs, which killed [hundreds](#) of new graduates and their family members. Damascus held the opposition armed groups in northwest Syria responsible, claiming it was a direct drone attack on the Academy. Government forces then launched strikes impacting [thousands of locations](#) in Lattakia, Idlib and Aleppo, killing at least 70 people,<sup>6</sup> and injuring 338. Russian warplanes also reportedly [carried](#) out 144 airstrikes in October, killing nine civilians, including three children and two women.<sup>7,8</sup> The largest number of attacks in one day was recorded on 17 October, consisting of 32 aerial raids in total.

The strikes were [described](#) by the chairman of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Paulo Pinheiro, as the largest escalation of hostilities in four years. According to a 2 November statement by the Response Coordination Group, attacks displaced 120,000 residents from southern Idlib and west Aleppo by the end of October. Although statements by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM) on 18 October [revealed](#) that the displacement patterns were fluid and that nearly half of the people displaced have now returned to their homes, prolonged hostilities risk increasing IDP waves and movements from the area, potentially heightening social tensions in host communities and adding pressure on humanitarian actors.

### Impact on essential services

Government forces targeted more than 88 [vital facilities](#) including schools, markets, camps, hospitals, and medical centers, places of worship and water infrastructure. In response to the attacks, local authorities, UN agencies and other NGOs scrambled to meet increased needs. From 5 to 27 October, over 140 [trucks](#) carrying shelter and WASH items, medicines, nutrition supplements and other aid provided by the UN crossed into northwest Syria via the Bab Al-Hawa and Bal Al-Salam crossings.

The continuous bombing has put huge pressure on health services; the Idlib Health Directorate is working at its [maximum](#) capacity, and a circular has been issued to health facilities to work under a state of emergency (ie, to only treat urgent cases, and to prioritize life-saving assistance). Forty-three [health facili-](#)

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6 The victims included three aid workers, 14 women and 27 children, and the injured included 77 children.

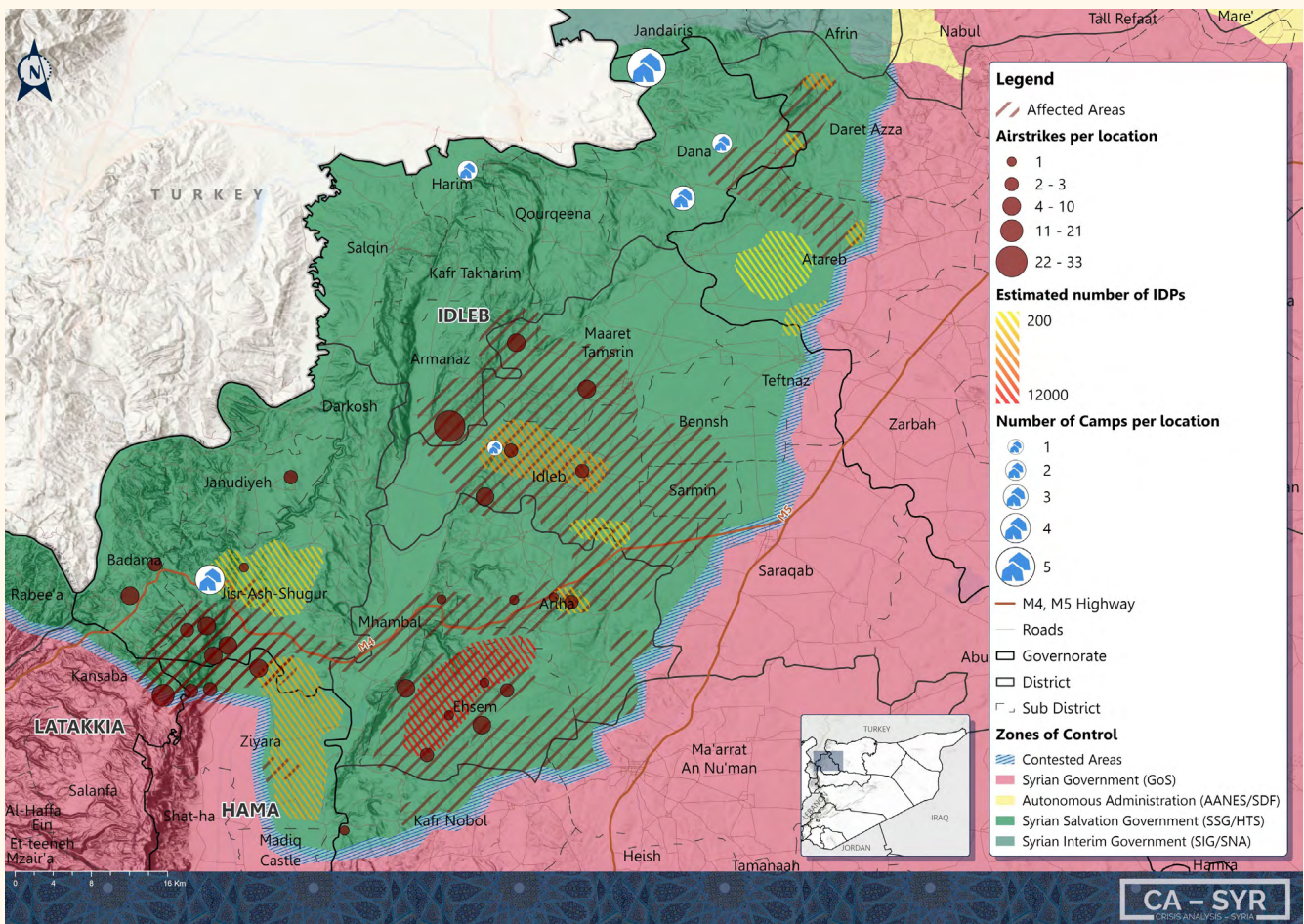
7 The airstrikes were [distributed](#) into 114 air strikes within Idlib Governorate, 23 within the Lattakia countryside, and 7 in the Al-Ghab Plain in the Hama countryside.

8 The Russian air strikes killed 60, injured more than 100 people with varying injuries since 24 June.

ties were impacted, including maternity and child hospitals and multiple primary healthcare centers. At least one hospital was closed completely. The worst impacted areas were in southern Idlib, where patients were transferred to Bab Al-Hawa Hospital or hospitals in the north via ambulances sent also from the north. The health sector in the northwest is still recovering from the February earthquakes, and will struggle to cope with the reduced capacity as a result of direct attacks and reduced services.

The education sector was also badly impacted, with 24 schools and universities bombed. The education authorities in both [Idlib](#) and Aleppo [suspended](#) classes and exams several times throughout October, causing yet more disruption to learning in the northwest.

Everyday economic activity was almost fully suspended in Idlib city and southern Idlib. Most of the markets including those for livestock and vegetables were shut down in Idlib City, Jisr Ash-Shugur and Ariha. A [commercial festival](#) in Idlib, originally planned for 1-10 October, was suspended on 5 October, and reopened on 12 October to far fewer vendors (75 reduced to 50).



Map: Areas hit by Syrian government airstrikes, displacement trends and IDP shelters. (Source: CA-SYR).

## New waves of displacement

The levels of displacement caused by the sustained campaign were measured as the highest since 2020 (during which the Syrian army and its allies recaptured territory along the southern border of Idlib). Though half of the IDPs have now returned, [UN reports](#) reveal that agencies are still receiving news of further displacement; monitoring the displacement, which is still active mainly from southern Idlib areas, is challenging due to the ongoing hostilities.

The SSG has [established](#) 17 centers to receive IDPs with a capacity to accommodate 1,250 households. Some of the IDPs traveled to these centers while the majority of others joined their relatives in areas close to the Turkish border and northern Aleppo. For those who returned, many went back to southern Idlib to harvest their olive crops, their main source of income. Displacement affected other agrarian professions and livelihoods, including beekeepers and sheep herders, for example, who were also impacted, leaving behind their assets and unable to allow livestock to graze in pastures due to the threat of bombardment.

## No let up in sight

The largest implications of new IDP movements are perhaps yet to come, and are arguably linked to the ongoing violence and the potential for prolonged hostilities. At the time of writing, the Syrian government's bombardment on Idlib is yet to stop. Previous conflict patterns in Idlib suggest that the October rounds are unique; rounds of hostilities between the government and HTS usually include limited airstrikes and contained shelling, and extensive media coverage. These most recent hostilities have been characterized by extensive, relatively indiscriminate shelling and a lack of local or international attention, largely to do with the conflict in Gaza otherwise distracting media sources.

Analysts [speculated](#) that the Syrian government requested Russian approval and support for a military operation to reach and control the M4 highway. While speculative in nature, the claims are not unfounded and are supported by the fact that the Syrian government forces are exclusively bombing the Idlib region compared to northern Aleppo. The targeting of Idlib also goes in line with the Syrian government's previously explicit ambitions and demands regarding the necessity of opening the M4 highway to commercial traffic, even so far as controlling southern Idlib to achieve this. Recapturing the M4 is, however, complicated by its intrinsic link to geopolitical and regional dynamics. Particularly, the Turkish-Russian agreements (the most recent being a ceasefire agreement in March 2020 which called for de-escalation and demilitarization zones in Idlib) and the development of Turkish-Syrian relations, which are at a stalemate currently, are factors for the Syrian government to consider before attempting to recapture the M4.

What is clear, however, is that human suffering in Idlib is only expected to get worse should the Syrian government continue its campaign. During the last government military ground operation at the end of 2019-2020, a large number of residents in areas south of the M4 highway were displaced; some eventually returned largely due to the lack of alternatives and their dependency on their land

as their main source of income. Should the Syrian government recapture these areas in its quest to reach the M4, it is likely that people living in Jisr-Ash-Shughur and Ariha districts, the Al-Ghab Plain and smaller areas north of the M4, [estimated](#) about 130 villages hosting 85,000 families, will be displaced, losing their homes and source of income again.

Should this happen, waves of displaced people are expected to reach border areas in northern Idlib and northern Aleppo, then potentially cross to Turkey. Intuitively, it is possible that smuggling of people into Turkey could increase, which could trigger a Turkish response in the form of direct military involvement to prevent further Syrian immigration across the border.

Increased displacement is likely to add further pressure on the humanitarian response actors to respond to a new crisis in an area facing desperate economic conditions, prolonged displacement and protracted recovery as a result of the conflict and the February 2023 earthquake. Humanitarian actors in northwest Syria are also operating under the looming threat of decreased funding and the closure of cross-border aid operations.

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CRISIS ANALYSIS - SYRIA  
RESEARCH SERIES ON THE MEDIA/INTERNET IMPACT OF THE FEBRUARY EARTHQUAKES ON NORTHWEST SYRIA



Volume 7.  
OBSTACLES TO POST-EARTHQUAKE  
REHABILITATION

October 2023



Hamas-Israel War: Implications for Syria

1

## HAMAS-ISRAEL WAR IMPLICATIONS FOR SYRIA

12 OCTOBER 2023



View from the occupied Golan Heights overlooking the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)-administered Purple Line between Israel and Syria, which divides Syria's Quneitra governorate.

On 7 October, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict took a turn for the worse after Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, leading to a formal declaration of war by the Israeli government. In the following days, media outlets reported sporadic attacks originating from southern Syria and southern Lebanon targeting areas in northern Israel that were also met with Israeli retaliation, though limited in scope. This included targeted artillery fire into the Syrian government-controlled Quneitra and Dar'a governorates. Reactions from Palestinian groups in Syria suggest that should hostilities continue to escalate, Syria alongside Iran, Lebanon, northern Yemen and Iraq who are all part of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' are expected to fall in line and retaliate against Israel, opening the door for a broader regional conflict. However, certain dynamics, particularly those related to both the Damascus-Hamas relations and the likely careful calculus by Damascus as it attempts to reemerge from a decade of civil conflict, suggest the possibility of a relatively measured outcome as compared to broader regional confrontation. That said, a number of threats - largely speculative in nature and difficult to accurately ascertain - could create further Syrian-Israeli escalation.

This situation report will attempt to clear the fog on where the Syrian government fits into the latest rounds of violence and offer key considerations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Syria. To do so, Crisis Analysis - Syria (CA-SYR) will first briefly present the events that took place starting 7 October, followed by outlining the presence of Palestinian armed groups in Syria, and explore the Syrian government's relationship with Hamas in order to gauge the possibility of the Syrian government edging towards confronting Israel in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but in isolation from Hamas.

This report argues that it is unlikely that the Syrian government will pursue or sponsor escalation with Israel. Nevertheless, it is difficult to decouple the latest round of violence between Israel and Hamas from the regional geopolitical realities, such as the simmering Israeli-Iranian tensions. However, the US's firm stance on supporting Israel, rhetorically and militarily, is likely to act as a deterrent preventing hostilities from reaching extraordinary heights and limiting them to possible shelling and artillery strikes targeting Israel.



SEPTEMBER 2023



### NWS Series Volume 7.

#### Obstacles to post-earthquake rehabilitation

*In the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Northwest Syria, over 265,000 people lost their homes, while many were either moderately or severely damaged. Humanitarian and local governance actors and community and grassroots initiatives responded, however for many there has been a focus on short-term fixes overshadowing longer-term solutions. Political complexities around the Syrian conflict, coupled with a lack of longer-term vision in the humanitarian and development responses, continue to complicate matters.*

[Go to report](#)

### Hamas-Israel War: Implications for Syria

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### Monthly Report, September 2023

*Bashar al-Assad's visit to China signals a potential easing of Syria's international isolation, and additional funding streams. Damascus made futile attempts to end the As-Sweida protests, which gathered interest internationally. In northeast Syria, 93 families left Al-Hol camp to return to Ar-Raqqa. In Deir-ez-Zor, The Autonomous Administration raised its salaries by 100%, and introduced policy to attract investments, reduce monopolies and regulate payments. In retaliation to a terrorist attack in Ankara, the Turkish army decimated infrastructure in the northeast. The first UN aid convoy since July entered through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, facilitated by the Humanitarian Action Coordination Office. In Idleb, the Syrian army responded viciously to an attack on a Military Academy in Homs, bombing hospitals, schools and residential areas.*

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The Crisis Analysis – Syria (CA-SYR), formerly HAT, 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.



*This report is for humanitarian/development purposes only. CA-SYR strives to ensure products are impartial. The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of Mercy Corps as an organization.*