The national average price of a standard reference food basket in March 2020 was SYP 43,774 (USD 63 at the official exchange rate 700/USD), increasing by nine percent compared to February 2020.

The Syrian government mitigation measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 virus implemented from mid-March 2020 onwards, induced consumer panic buying and impacted the price of food items. Nationally, on average between the third and fourth weeks of March the price of garlic increased by 200 percent, commercial bread increased by 101 percent, oranges and lemons by around 70 percent, potatoes by 36 percent, onions by 33 percent, rice by 24 percent, vegetable oil by 11 percent and sugar by six percent.

On the 29th of March, the official exchange rate between the Syrian Pound and the US Dollar was officially devalued by 61 percent from SYP 434/USD to SYP 700/USD. Moreover, the national average informal exchange rate increased by nine percent since February 2020 reaching SYP 1,129/USD.

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**Highlights**

- The national average price of a standard reference food basket in March 2020 was SYP 43,774 (USD 63 at the official exchange rate 700/USD), increasing by nine percent compared to February 2020.
- The Syrian government mitigation measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 virus implemented from mid-March 2020 onwards, induced consumer panic buying and impacted the price of food items. Nationally, on average between the third and fourth weeks of March the price of garlic increased by 200 percent, commercial bread increased by 101 percent, oranges and lemons by around 70 percent, potatoes by 36 percent, onions by 33 percent, rice by 24 percent, vegetable oil by 11 percent and sugar by six percent.
- On the 29th of March, the official exchange rate between the Syrian Pound and the US Dollar was officially devalued by 61 percent from SYP 434/USD to SYP 700/USD. Moreover, the national average informal exchange rate increased by nine percent since February 2020 reaching SYP 1,129/USD.
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**Standard Food Basket**

The national average price of a standard reference food basket increased by nine percent between February and March 2020, reaching SYP 43,774. The national average food basket price was 76 percent higher than that of September 2019 and was 84 percent higher compared to March 2019 (Figure 1).

The increase in the national average food basket price in March is a result of many factors mainly the panic buying that was witnessed across Syria especially during the last week of March. Additionally, the Syrian government measures to control the spread of COVID-19 such as closing shops, bars and restaurants, imposing curfew hours and introducing reduced operating hours of bakeries, likely also contributed to the increase in price of the reference food basket.

All 14 governorates reported an increasing average reference food basket price in March with the highest month-on-month (m-o-m) increase reported in As-Sweida (up 25 percent), followed by Rural Damascus (up 19 percent) and Homs (up 17 percent).

Idleb continued to report the highest average food basket price in Syria, reaching SYP 51,264 in March 2020 (up four percent m-o-m), followed by Rural Damascus (up 19 percent) and Homs (up 17 percent).

Idleb also reported the highest average food basket price in Syria, reaching SYP 51,264 in March 2020 (up four percent m-o-m), followed by Rural Damascus at SYP 47,581 (up 13 percent m-o-m). The lowest reported average food basket price was reported in Deir-ez-Zor at SYP 39,475 (up five percent m-o-m) followed by Aleppo at SYP 40,561 (up seven percent m-o-m).

Compared to last year, the price of the reference food basket has increased across all 14 governorates. Idleb recorded the highest increase (up 121 percent) followed by Damascus (up 114 percent) and As-Sweida (up 113 percent).

The gap between the highest and lowest average food basket price shrunk by 14 percent from SYP 13,778 in February 2020 to SYP 11,789 in March 2020 (Chart 1).
COVID-19 weekly impact analysis of COVID-19 disruptions on Syrian markets in March

Overview

The COVID-19 outbreak came at a time when Syria had already been experiencing a turbulent past few months. Since October 2019, Syria experienced ripple waves of the Lebanese financial crisis on its own economy. By March 2020, the Syrian informal exchange rate had depreciated by 82 percent since October 2019 levels, weakening from SYP 636/USD to SYP 1,155/USD. Food prices, especially of imported goods increased as a result. For example WFP’s reference food basket increased by 72 percent between October 2019 and March 2020. The COVID-19 outbreak added an further dimension to the economic woes affecting the Syrian economy (Chart 2).

Even though Syria did not officially announce a ‘COVID-19 case’ until 22 March 2020, the start of the COVID-19 related disruptions came seven days earlier, on 15 March 2020, when the Syrian government closing schools and partial closure of banks followed by closing of all public spaces, including parks, cafes and restaurants on 18 March, in order to reduce the possible spread of the virus. Since 18 March, the progressive introduction of a series of restrictions, such as: closure of international borders (20 March), closure of all non-food businesses including public institutions (22 March), restriction of movement between and within governorates (24 March) and introduction of a 6pm to 6am curfew (25 March) led to widescale panic buying, hoarding of commodities and resulted in big increases in the price of food commodities, especially between the third and fourth weeks of March.

Food basket weekly evolution

Between the first and third weeks of March, WFP’s national average reference food basket price increased by three percent, while it increased by a further 18 percent between the third and fourth weeks alone. Hereby, bringing the average reference food basket price to be 21 percent higher (SYP 49,070) by the fourth week of March compared to the first week (SYP 40,666) - Figure 2. All governorates experienced food price increases throughout March, especially between the last two weeks of March, with the exception of Idleb where no restrictions were imposed in March and the reference food basket price remained relatively stable, increasing by only two percent m-o-m.

Market overview

Across Syria, the price of commercial bread increased by six percent between the first and third weeks of March and by 101 percent between the last two weeks of March. Prices jumped nationally from an average SYP 160/bundle to SYP 339/bundle. Closure of bakeries, new curfew hours, and long queues in front of mobile shops to buy bread which reportedly fell in quality in some governorates, forced many to resort to commercial bread. With limited measures to impose strict price restrictions, traders were able to sell goods at previously unthought-of price levels.

Main cereal prices all registered price hikes. The increase in cereal prices has been significant between third and fourth weeks of March (28 percent for bulgur, 24 percent for rice and 38 percent for wheat flour). Red split lentils increased by 27 percent, vegetable oil by 11 percent, sugar by six percent, and the informal SYP/USD exchange rate depreciated by a further 10 percent.

The price of vegetables and fruits were also affected. Between the third and fourth weeks of March, the price of potatoes increased by 36 percent and onions’ price increased by 33 percent. Garlic reported an increase between 100 - 200 percent across different regions of Syria, and oranges and lemons reported price increases of around 50 - 60 percent. The increase in price of these commodities is largely led by the public belief of these food’s benevolent health properties. The increase in the price of potatoes is led by a shortage of potatoes in Syria as the commodity is currently out of season in Syria.

Regional breakdown of price increases during COVID-19

Middle region (Homs, Hama, Damascus and Rural Damascus)
Between the last two weeks of March, the price of food-items were not stable and varied between shops within the same neighbourhood. In Homs and Hama, the supply of commodities has been affected by the closure of many factories as well as movement restrictions set by the government that affected trade between rural and urban areas. The movement restrictions also led many shops to close. In front of bakeries, there were long queues and the quantity was limited to two bread bundles per family at SYP 50/bundle (1.3 kg). Mobile shops also sell bread but at an increased cost of SYP 75/bundle. In Damascus, between the third and fourth weeks of March wheat flour, bulgur and rice significantly increased by 95, 38 and 16 percent respectively. Commercial bread soared in price by 187 percent during the same period. Moreover, in Rural Damascus, between the third and fourth weeks of March, wheat flour, bulgur and rice significantly increased by 102, 70 and 41 percent respectively, and commercial bread soared by 217 percent.

North-west Syria (Aleppo)
In Aleppo, while no shops closed and commodities were available, prices have increased mostly because people were stockpiling commodities and panic buying. The price of rice increased by 31 percent between the third and fourth weeks of March alone, and the price of bulgur increased by 23 percent between third and fourth weeks of March. The price of wheat flour increased by 29 percent between the third and fourth weeks of March. Many people reportedly lost their jobs especially unskilled labourers who depend on daily wages as well as those commuting between rural and urban areas as either there was no transportation available or the cost of transportation increased. The movement restrictions did not affect food traders as much since they could still trade goods between governorates and across towns.

Cross border (XB) region (Idleb and Aleppo [Afrin, A’zaz and Atareb])
By end March no curfew had been declared yet in Idleb and Aleppo XB. Markets were still functioning except big bazaars/big markets and the supply of most food-items was adequate, even for bread. Prices for most commodities had increased due to the recent conflict and the financial crisis in general and not as a result of COVID-19 per se. By early April, restrictions from Turkey on people’s movement are expected but not on food supplies or humanitarian assistance. Cereal prices seem to be more or less stable. The price of rice decreased by five percent reaching SYP 625/kg between February and March. Wheat flour price decreased by four percent m-o-m, reaching SYP 467/kg and bulgur decreased by one percent reaching SYP 423/kg. Vegetable prices, on the other hand, significantly increased by 47 percent for onions reaching SYP 600/kg and by 33 percent for potatoes reaching SYP 327/kg between February and March.

North-east Syria (Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor)
In north-east Syria, supply routes which are mainly from north Iraq and from Aleppo through Ar-Raqqa and on to Al-Hasakeh, have not been affected as movement permissions for food trade were still available. Shops remained open from 6am until 3pm and transportation was available during the same hours meaning that traders could get their supplies from wholesalers. In Al-Hasakeh, the main livestock and vegetable markets were closed to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus, hereby forcing people to depend on small retailers for their meat, vegetables and fruits. Furthermore, vegetable and fruit availability was negatively affected by the increased need for permissions to transport food from Aleppo and Iraq, which has made travel more costly and time consuming. In Ar-Raqqa, between the third and fourth weeks of March, bulgur increased by one percent, wheat flour by 13 percent and rice increased by 11 percent. In Deir-ez-Zor, food prices for basic items (vegetable, fruit and livestock) have generally increased which is also affected by exportation of goods to Iraq. Some commodities became scarce like wheat flour, vegetable oil and sugar. Between the third and fourth weeks of March, wheat flour, bulgur and rice have significantly increased by 14, 27 and 24 percent respectively. Bakeries have stopped selling directly to the public to reduce crowding and there are now assigned agents who sell the bread bundle at an increased cost.

Southern region (As-Sweida, Dar’a and Quneitra)
In Quneitra, between the third and fourth weeks of March, the price of bulgur and rice increased by 24 and 42 percent respectively. In Dar’a, between the third and fourth weeks of March, wheat flour’s price increased by 65 percent, bulgur’s price increased by 22 percent, while the price of rice increased by nine percent. In As-Sweida, between the third and fourth weeks of March, wheat flour increased by 45 percent, bulgur’s price increased by 39 percent and the price of rice increased by 61 percent.

Coastal region (Lattakia and Tartous)
The price of food-items varied between shops within the same neighbourhood across Lattakia and Tartous. In Lattakia, between the third and fourth weeks of March, retail cereal prices increased by 41 percent for wheat flour, 11 percent for bulgur and by six percent for rice. In Tartous, over the same period, wheat flour prices increased by 29 percent and bulgur prices increased by 12 percent. Prices in the coastal areas were mainly affected by suppliers reportedly hoarding food-items causing shortage in some commodities such as rice and bulgur as well as consumers’ panic buying. The Syrian Government shut around 30 shops on the 31st of March as prices in these shops were higher than the government’s ceiling prices. In addition, by end March The Syrian Government imposed an export ban on eggs, milk, cheese and legumes due to possible scarcity in Syria as well as javel water and chlorine due to its need for sterilization. On the other hand imports remain highly encouraged due to a lack of highly demanded commodities such as wheat flour, rice and sugar in Syria. For example, 25,000 MT of Russian soft wheat is set to arrive in early April through Lattakia and 5,000 MT of potatoes to arrive from Egypt through Tartous also early April.
Staple cereals retail prices

Wheat Flour
In March 2020, the national average retail price of wheat flour throughout Syria increased by 22 percent m-o-m and by 96 percent y-o-y, reaching SYP 523/Kg. The highest m-o-m increase and the highest recorded wheat price was reported in Damascus (up 53 percent) reaching SYP 683/kg, followed by Rural Damascus (up 50 percent) reaching SYP 649/kg - Chart 3. The lowest average wheat flour price was recorded in Aleppo at SYP 428/kg (up six percent m-o-m) followed by Dar’a at SYP 462/kg (up 32 percent m-o-m).

Broken down by regions, Syria’s middle region reported the highest retail price at SYP 582/Kg (up 40 percent m-o-m), while north-west Syria reported the lowest retail price at SYP 428/Kg (up eight percent m-o-m).

Rice
The national average retail price of Egyptian white rice increased by 14 percent since February 2020 and by 125 percent since March 2019, reaching SYP 882/Kg in March 2020. The highest m-o-m price was reported in Damascus at SYP 1,058/Kg (up 24 percent m-o-m) followed by Quneitra at SYP 1,017/Kg (up 21 percent m-o-m). The lowest price was reported in Idleb at SYP 625/Kg (down five percent m-o-m), followed by Aleppo at SYP 761/Kg (up 26 percent m-o-m).
M-o-m, Syria’s middle region and north-west Syria reported the highest increase (up 31 percent), while north-east Syria reported the lowest increase (up nine percent). On the other hand, the coastal and cross border (XB) regions reported no change since last month (Chart 4).

Bulgur
The national average price of bulgur was SYP 648/Kg representing an increase of 17 percent m-o-m and a 116 percent increase y-o-y. Damascus reported the highest bulgur retail price at SYP 723/Kg (up 20 percent m-o-m), followed by Rural Damascus at SYP 701/Kg (up 36 percent m-o-m). The lowest bulgur retail prices were reported in Idleb at SYP 423/Kg (down one percent m-o-m) and Aleppo at SYP 543/Kg (up 16 percent m-o-m).

Syria’s middle region reported the highest average bulgur price by region at SYP 703/kg (up 29 percent m-o-m), followed by the coastal region at SYP 675 (up 15 percent m-o-m). The XB region reported the lowest average bulgur price at SYP 450/kg (unchanged m-o-m) followed by north-west Syria at SYP 600/Kg (up 18 percent m-o-m) - Chart 5.

Bread prices
In March 2020, the national average price of subsidized bread was SYP 57/bundle (up six percent m-o-m). The increase in the subsidized bread price this month is linked to the bread mobile shops and selling through agents introduced by the government. Across many governorates in Syria, it was reported that agents were selling bread bundles at higher prices than the official price.

Moreover, commercial bread price soared between February and March 2020 by 57 percent reaching SYP 223/bundle. WFP-monitored commercial bread includes resold public bread bundles. The government’s measures to reduce bakery operating hours in different governorates and selling public bread through agents and mobile shops, forced many households to resort to commercial bread thus causing bread’s price to soar. Idleb’s increase in price over 2019 and early 2020 was led by the intense fighting, the disruption of trade routes from north-east Syria and a resulting decision to reduce the bread bundle’s weight size by half.
Exchange Rate

On 26 March, the official exchange rate between the Syrian Pound and the US Dollar was officially devalued by 61 percent from SYP 434/USD to SYP 700/USD. Only the Ministry of Trade can now use the SYP 434/USD exchange rate for favourable import conversion purposes. Moreover, the national average informal exchange rate increased by nine percent since February 2020 and by 111 percent since March 2019, reaching SYP 1,129/USD. On the other hand, the operational UN rate has remained unchanged at SYP 700/USD, since November 2019.

The highest informal exchange rate was reported in Deir-ez-Zor at SYP 1,210/USD (up 20 percent m-o-m; up 127 percent y-o-y), followed by Al-Hasakeh at SYP 1,189/USD (up 13 percent m-o-m; and up 125 percent y-o-y). Conversely, the lowest rates were reported in Dar’a at SYP 1,044 (up four percent m-o-m; up 100 percent y-o-y) and Damascus at SYP 1,047 (up one percent m-o-m; up 97 percent y-o-y) - Table 1.

Diesel and butane gas prices

In March 2020, the informal national average price of diesel decreased by 21 percent since February 2020 reaching SYP 401/litre. However, the informal price remains higher than the formal price (SYP 183/litre) by 119 percent (Chart 7). Idleb continued to report the highest informal price at SYP 743/litre (down six percent m-o-m). The lowest average informal price was still reported in Al-Hasakeh at SYP 150/litre (down six percent m-o-m).

Broken down by regions, the highest average informal diesel price was recorded in the XB region at SYP 678/litre (down 12 percent m-o-m), followed by north-west Syria at SYP 472/litre (up seven percent m-o-m). The lowest average informal diesel price was recorded in north-east Syria at SYP 243/litre (up two percent m-o-m), followed by Syria’s middle and southern regions at SYP 384/litre (up eight and two percent respectively).

The informal national average price of one butane gas cylinder (25,000 L) reached SYP 12,670/refill in March 2020 which was 337 percent higher than the subsidized price of SYP 2,899 /refill. The increase in the price is related to the lack of butane gas cylinders on the official market. Although each family is entitled to one butane gas cylinder refill every 23 days, many reported waiting for more than one month to receive their cylinders, causing prices on the informal market to increase (Chart 8).

Dar’a reported the highest informal refill price at SYP 17,083/refill followed by Tartous and As-Sweida at SYP 16,125/refill. While Al-Hasakeh reported the lowest informal refill price at SYP 5,146/refill, followed by Ar-Raqqā at SYP 6,667/refill.

By region the north-west region reported the highest informal refill price at SYP 15,354/refill (up 11 percent m-o-m), followed by the coastal region at SYP 14,688/refill (up 25 percent m-o-m). While north-east Syria reported the lowest informal refill price at SYP 8,411/refill (up 26 percent m-o-m), followed by the XB region at SYP 10,910/refill (up two percent m-o-m).

Vegetable prices

In March 2020, the national average monthly price of potatoes increased by 45 percent m-o-m, reaching SYP 555/kg due to a lack of potatoes. Also, the national average price of onions soared by 104 percent m-o-m, reaching SYP 867/kg and the price of garlic increased by 100 to 200 percent over the last two weeks of March. The price of lemons and oranges also increased by around 70 percent across Syria over the last two weeks of March. The increase in demand and hence in the price of onions, garlic, lemons and oranges is due to the popular belief that these commodities help build stronger immunity against the COVID-19 virus.

* No formal prices have been reported in the cross border region because there is neither subsidized diesel nor subsidized butane cylinders in the region.
Terms of Trade (ToT)\textsuperscript{3}

ToT between wage labour and wheat flour

The national average non-skilled labour wage, which represents construction, off-loading and agricultural labour, was SYP 2,905/day in March 2020 (unchanged m-o-m). The wage rate was 25 percent above levels recorded in September 2019 and 36 percent above its y-o-y level (Chart 9).

Out of all regions, the coastal governorates reported the highest decrease of 27 percent between February and March 2020, reaching SYP 3,188/day. The decrease is linked to the closure of most shops late March which negatively affected the demand for labour negatively. As a result, many unskilled labour wages decreased.

The national average ToT between wheat flour and wage labour, a proxy indicator for purchasing power, decreased by 18 percent m-o-m, because wheat flour price significantly increased since last month.

Compared to both September and March 2019, the national average ToT between wheat flour and wage labour decreased by 34 and 31 percent respectively, highlighting a significant worsening purchasing power trend. The national daily wage of a non-skilled labourer could only buy 5.6 kg of wheat flour in March 2020 compared to 6.8 kg in February 2020, 8.4 kg in September 2019 and 8 kg in March 2019. This is one of the lowest national average ToTs between wheat flour and wage rate recorded since the start of the crisis.

ToT between sheep and wheat flour

The national average price of a two-year old alive male sheep increased to SYP 233,905/sheep in March 2020, up six percent m-o-m (Chart 11). The increase in sheep prices is linked to the depreciation of the Syrian Pound that caused fodder prices to increase as well since many fodder components are imported.

Dar’a reported the highest average price across Syria at SYP 273,833/sheep (down ten percent m-o-m) followed by Homs and Hama both at SYP 247,500/sheep (up 14 percent m-o-m). As-Sweida reported the lowest average price for an alive two-year old male sheep at SYP 177,500/sheep (up five percent m-o-m), followed by Aleppo at SYP 205,464 (down seven percent m-o-m).

In March 2020, the ToT between an alive two-year old male sheep and wheat flour was 447 kg/sheep (down 14 percent m-o-m). Highlighting a deterioration in the exchange for livestock owners who could buy on average 14 percent less kgs of wheat compared to a month earlier.

Compared to March 2019, north-east Syria reported the lowest ToT at 398 kg/sheep, highlighting the worst purchasing power by region, followed by Syria’s middle region at 414 kg/sheep. On the other hand, the cross-border region reported the highest ToT at 514 kg/sheep, followed by the southern region at 511 kg/sheep.

Cereal wholesale prices

In March 2020, the national average wholesale price of cereals increased by 15 percent for Egyptian white rice reaching SYP 783,784/MT, by six percent for bulgur reaching SYP 508,295/MT, and by 12 percent for wheat grain reaching SYP 324,198/MT. This translates to USD 1,120/MT for Egyptian white rice, USD 726/MT for bulgur grain, and USD 463/MT for wheat grain at the official exchange rate of SYP 700/USD. However, wheat price on the international market was USD 209/MT (55 percent less than in Syria).

\textsuperscript{3} The ToT are proxy indicators of the purchasing power of households that rely on livestock and/or casual labour as their main source of income for the purchase of cereals from local markets. ToT are important components of food security analysis. Changes in the terms of trade between wages/livestock and staple food commodities are indicative of the trends in purchasing power and the impact on the food security situation of households dependent on food purchases through income from daily wage labour and/or the sale of livestock.
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**Key:**
- **Red:** Price increase equal to or greater than 25 percent
- **Orange:** Price increase between 0.1 and 25 percent
- **Yellow:** No price change
- **Green:** Price decrease between 0.1 and 25 percent
- **Blue:** Price decrease below normal price fluctuation

* Wage rate increase equal to or greater than 25 percent
- Wage rate decrease between 0.1 and 25 percent
- *No wage change

**Note:** There is no substitutes bread in Idlib.
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