

Situation Overview

- COVID-19 cases continued to rise across Syria. As of 31 March 2021, a total of 18,909 COVID-19 cases, including 1,265 fatalities, were confirmed by the Health Minister in government-controlled areas. The monthly increase in COVID-19 cases in March (3,321 cases) signals an upward trend compared to February 2021 (1,540 cases) and represents the second highest monthly caseload since the beginning of the pandemic. The Syrian government initiated a COVID-19 vaccination campaign at the beginning of March, targeting frontline healthcare workers assigned to COVID-19 isolation centers. In opposition-held areas in northwest Syria, COVID-19 cases increased at a slower pace. Around 21,318 COVID-19 cases were reported by the end of March 2021, with only 143 new cases in March.
- The crippling fuel crisis intensified throughout Syria in March. During the second week of March, the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources (MoPMR) announced a temporary reduction in fuel allocations by 15 percent for petrol and 20 percent for diesel across government-controlled areas. This represents the second decrease in fuel allocations in Syria since the beginning of the year. The MoPMR also announced an increase in the prices of 95-Octane gasoline (from SYP 1,350 to SYP 2,000 per liter) and 90-Octane gasoline (subsidized from SYP 450 to SYP 750 per liter and non-subsidized from SYP 650 to SYP 750 per liter), de facto eliminating the price difference between subsidized and non-subsidized gasoline. All petrol had to be sold only via the smart card system according to individual allocations of quantities. In addition, the MoPMR announced an increase in the subsidized price of the 10-kg domestic butane gas cylinder (from SYP 2,700 to SYP 3,850). Furthermore, on 6 March 2021, missiles struck a fuel market and a fuel refinery in Aleppo, resulting in casualties and destroying around 200 to 300 fuel trucks. The Suez Canal blockage in Egypt has hindered the oil supplies into Syria. Both incidents have further aggravated the limited access to fuel in the country.
- The value of the Syrian pound continued to weaken steadily, seemingly exacerbated by the decline of the currency in neighboring Lebanon. In March 2021, the Syrian pound depreciated by a further 18 percent month-on-month in the informal exchange rate market, reaching an average SYP 3,972/USD. The highest week of national average informal exchange rate was recorded during the third week of March at SYP 4,427/USD. On 22 March 2021, the Syrian Central Bank raised the preferential exchange rate for international humanitarian organizations to SYP 2,500/USD. The official exchange rate remained unchanged at SYP 1,250/USD.
- The general security situation throughout Syria remained volatile in March. Intensified hostilities were reported in northwest Syria, with shelling largely concentrated in southern Idlib and northern Aleppo. On 21 March 2021, artillery shelling reportedly struck a hospital in Atareb district in western Aleppo. According to the International Rescue Committee, this was the fifth attack recorded on medical facilities this year, bringing the total number of attacks on healthcare facilities to 118 since January 2019. Moreover, strong winds during March caused widespread damage to IDP sites across northwest Syria. Around 88 IDP sites were reportedly affected by the heavy winds and some 1,521 tents were either destroyed or damaged. The recent flooding and winds incidents throughout most of the first quarter of 2021 have further aggravated the existing humanitarian needs of IDPs in northwest Syria.
- The United Nations and the European Union held the fifth Brussels conference at the end of March 2021, aiming to support the Syrian people and mobilize the international community to back a comprehensive and credible political solution to the prolonged conflict. Furthermore, in March 2021, WFP delivered general food assistance to approximately 4.8 million people across Syria. In Deir-ez-Zor governorate, a joint WFP-FAO project has restored water access to 6,000 smallholder farmers and the 2021 wheat yield in this area is estimated to increase by up to 12,000 metric tons.

Sources: [Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Development Report No.26 | March 2021](#), [COAR | Syria Update March 2021](#), [IRC Statement on Hospital Attack | Syria March 2021](#)



Key Points

- More than half of the surveyed households (51 percent) reported poor or borderline food consumption in March 2021, marking around a three-quarter increase (72 percent) compared to March 2020.
- Overall 62 percent of interviewed households indicated consuming animal-source protein or pulses less than twice a week throughout March 2021, which represents the lowest national average consumption rate of protein over the past six months.
- In March 2021, nine out of ten interviewed households reported applying at least one food-based coping mechanism to meet their food consumption needs, an increase of 11 percent since March 2020.
- Approximately 40 percent of interviewed households reported not being able to purchase the necessary medicines in March 2021, a 21 percent increase from a month earlier, mainly due to lack of financial resources (84 percent) and shortage of medicines in pharmacies (14 percent).

Key Characteristics



1,477
Households surveyed



13%
Female Headed Households



19%
Stay as guest



25%
Displaced Households

Methodology

This mVAM bulletin is based on data collected via live telephone interviews in March 2021 from households in locations across Syria. The phone numbers were generated using random-digit dialing. In March 2021, data was collected from a sample of 1,477 respondents across 13 governorates (Idlib is not covered). As per standard survey procedures, respondents' consent was obtained prior to the interviews. For security and safety measures, all respondents were identified with an anonymous ID.



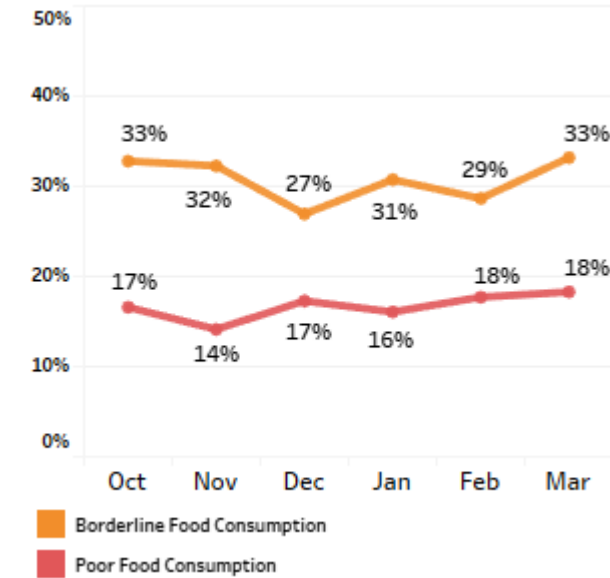
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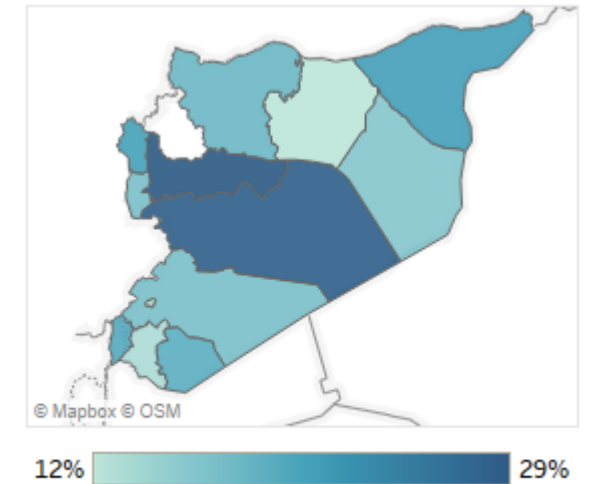
Food Consumption

- Food insecurity in Syria remained at critical levels, with more than half of the surveyed households (51 percent) reporting poor or borderline food consumption in March 2021. The national average rate of inadequate food consumption (poor and borderline combined) increased by 11 percent from February 2021 and 72 percent compared to March 2020. The spiral deterioration of food security in Syria is largely the consequence of a decade of conflict and economic meltdown fueled by the financial crisis in Lebanon, the plummeting of the Syrian currency, and the unilateral coercive measures on the country.
- Broken down by governorate, in March 2021, the highest proportion of households with poor or borderline food consumption was recorded in Hama, with two-thirds of interviewed households (66 percent) reporting inadequate food consumption (representing a 13 percent increase compared to a month earlier), followed by Homs (59 percent). The greatest monthly increase of surveyed households with poor or borderline food consumption was detected in Lattakia (up by 40 percent) and Damascus (up by 32 percent), reaching 58 percent and 47 percent, respectively, in March 2021. This rise was mainly driven by the increase in households reporting borderline food consumption in the two governorates.
- During the reporting period, nearly one out of five interviewed households in Syria (18 percent) reported poor food consumption, more than double the level recorded in March 2020. This highlights the continued deterioration of the food security situation across Syria. This trend was much higher in Hama (29 percent), an increase of four percentage points above the level recorded a month earlier and representing a three-fold increase since March 2020, followed by Homs (28 percent) and Al-Hasakeh (21 percent).
- According to residency status, in March 2021, around 60 percent of IDPs reported inadequate food consumption, an increase of 18 percent month-on-month and the highest level recorded since October 2020. Moreover, the total share of returnee and resident households with poor or borderline food consumption increased to 51 and 48 percent respectively.
- Furthermore, the insufficient consumption of protein-rich food items was reported across the country. In March 2021, overall 62 percent of interviewed households indicated consuming animal-source protein or pulses less than twice a week, which represents the lowest national average consumption rate of protein over the past six months. Food security projections signal further macronutrient deficiencies among Syrian households in the next coming months, potentially leading to an increase in acute and chronic malnutrition nationwide.

Fig1: The national average level of poor and borderline food consumption in the last six months



Map1: Percent of households by governorate reporting poor food consumption in March 2021



Data from Idleb is not available

Fig2: Percent of households with inadequate food consumption in the last six months by governorate

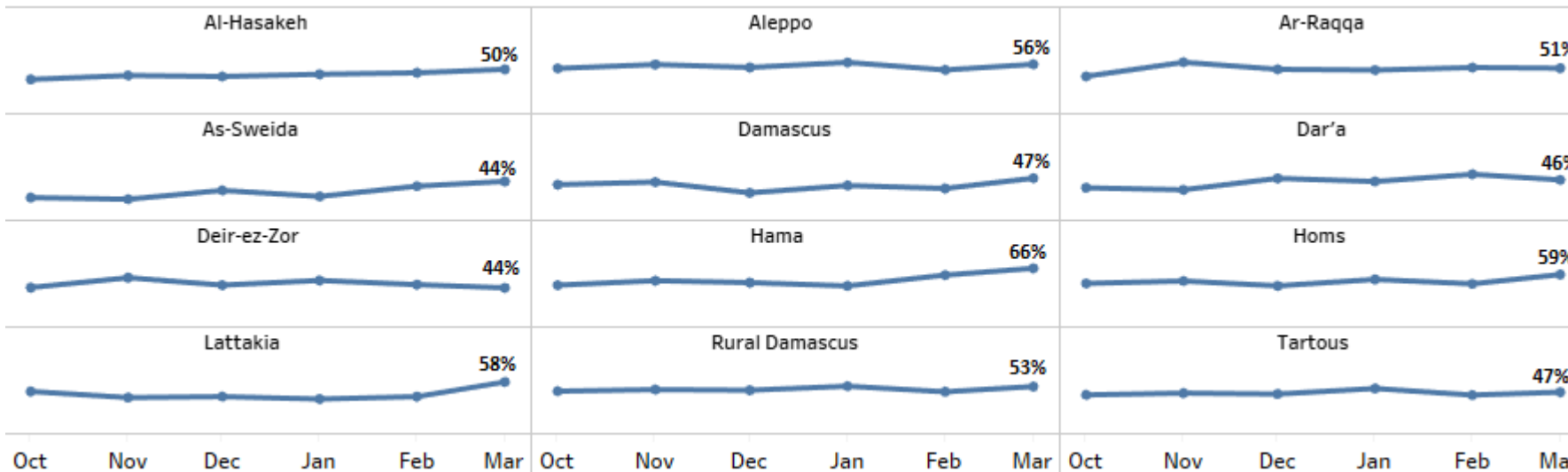
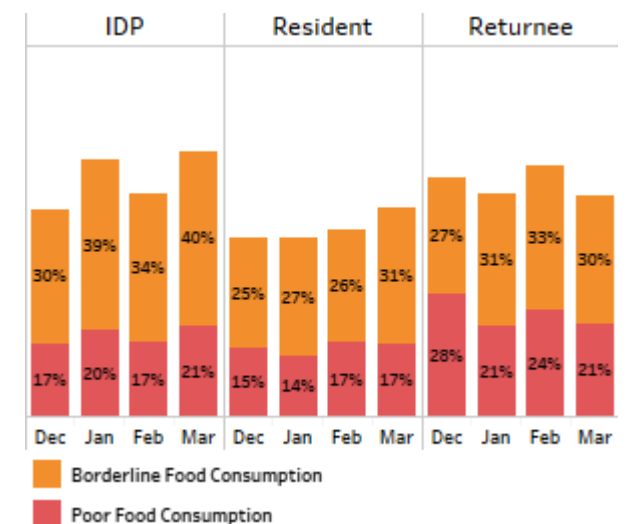


Fig3: Percent of households reporting poor and borderline food consumption according to displacement status





Coping Strategies

- Between February and March 2021, the national average reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) increased from 19.8 to 21.0, marking the highest national average level recorded since 2020. In March 2021, nine out of ten interviewed households reported applying at least one food-based coping mechanism to meet their food consumption needs, an increase of 11 percent since March 2020, with a higher proportion among female-headed households (95 percent) compared to male-headed households (89 percent). As food prices continued to skyrocket throughout Syria, almost 84 percent of interviewed households nationwide reported having already depleted their savings. The further erosion of the purchasing power pushed a high proportion of households to buy food on credit. In March 2021, 73 percent of surveyed households across Syria reported that they bought food on credit (an increase of three percentage points from a month earlier and up by 11 percent since March 2020), with peaks recorded in Al-Hasakeh (82 percent) and Ar-Raqqa (82 percent).
- In March 2021, consuming less preferred or less expensive food was the most widely adopted negative food coping strategy by surveyed households (72 percent), with a peak recorded in Al-Hasakeh (80 percent). Also, to meet food shortages, around 60 percent of interviewed households reported a reduction in the number of meals consumed per day, an increase of six percentage points from February 2021, with a higher proportion recorded among female-headed households (68 percent). In addition, nearly half of the surveyed households in Syria (49 percent) reported reducing food consumption by adult members to prioritize their children's food consumption needs, with peaks recorded in Al-Hasakeh (61 percent) and Lattakia (60 percent). Moreover, the dire economic circumstances have pushed Syrian households to more frequently rely on child labor. In March 2021, 15 percent of interviewed households reported taking children in the mandatory education age out of school in order to engage them in work and income generating activities to increase the household's income. This trend was more pronounced in Al-Hasakeh (32 percent) and Deir-ez-Zor (23 percent).
- According to displacement status, the average rCSI was higher among IDPs and returnees than residents. In March 2021, 95 percent of IDPs and 94 percent of returnees reported adopting at least one food-based coping strategy compared to 88 percent of residents.

Fig5: rCSI average by governorate over the last six months

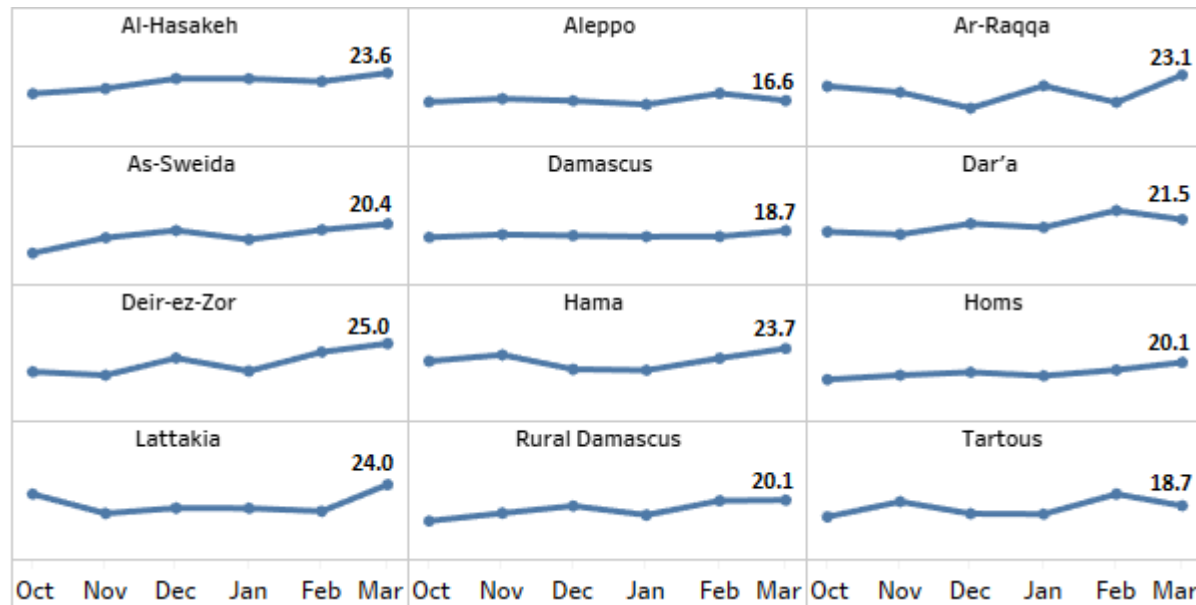
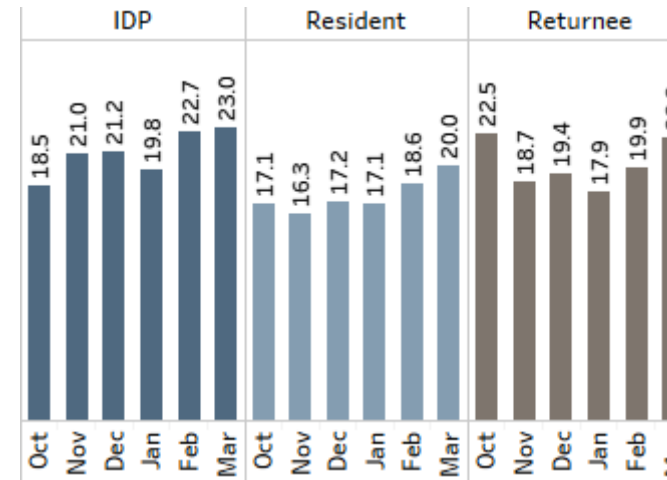
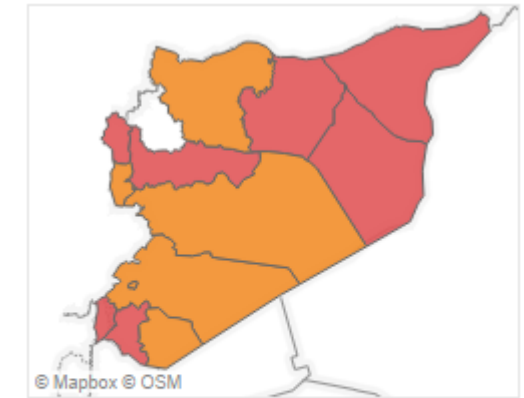


Fig4: rCSI average over the last six months according to displacement status



Map2: rCSI average by governorate in March 2021



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Data from Idleb is not available

Fig6: Overall percent of households by adopted coping strategy over the past six months

Coping Strategy	Month						
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Male	Less Expensive Food	63%	64%	65%	63%	67%	72%
	Reduce Number of Meals	54%	55%	52%	50%	53%	59%
	Limit Portion Size	42%	43%	44%	42%	45%	52%
	Borrow Food	45%	43%	43%	45%	46%	49%
	Restrict Consumption	46%	41%	44%	43%	47%	49%
Female	Less Expensive Food	67%	70%	70%	67%	76%	72%
	Reduce Number of Meals	57%	66%	61%	59%	65%	68%
	Limit Portion Size	40%	51%	48%	47%	48%	54%
	Borrow Food	48%	61%	51%	50%	49%	57%
	Restrict Consumption	41%	43%	46%	40%	48%	44%



COVID-19 Situation Overview I

- One year since the first COVID-19 case was recorded in Syria, the compounding impacts of the pandemic continued to increase the country's hardships. The COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated the food security and nutrition situation, further increasing the humanitarian needs nationwide.
- Syrian households continued adopting precautionary measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission. In March 2021, 77 percent of interviewed households in Syria reported staying indoors to avoid social gathering and crowded places, with a higher proportion recorded in Ar-Raqqa (85 percent). This indicates that most households across Syria are probably aware and have some understanding about COVID-19 preventive measures. While this figure remained high across the country, it decreased by 15 percent from March 2020 and marked the lowest national average reported rate since the beginning of the pandemic.
- The COVID-19 outbreak has triggered challenges for most Syrian households to access markets. In March 2021, nearly one out of four interviewed households (24 percent) indicated facing difficulties in reaching markets, an increase of four percentage points from February 2021. The main impediments cited by the respondents were pandemic outbreak and COVID-19 travel-related restrictions. Also, it's believed that recent fuel shortage has a likely negatively impact on accessing markets. This trend was highest in Al-Hasakeh (38 percent), an increase of 23 percent compared to a month earlier. Additionally, more than one third of surveyed households in Lattakia (36 percent) reported not having access to markets, double the level recorded in February 2021. These findings highlight nationwide food access concerns given that more than nine out of ten interviewed households across Syria (92 percent) reported relying on markets as a primary source of food. In terms of displacement status, a higher proportion of IDPs (29 percent) reported market access challenges, a six percentage points increase month-on-month, compared to returnees (21 percent) and residents (23 percent). From interviews conducted in March 2021, approximately three out of five households with no regular access to markets nationwide (56 percent) had poor or borderline food consumption. Furthermore, in March 2021, around five percent of surveyed households in Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo and Rural Damascus reported difficulties in obtaining remittances and/or food assistance due to movement restrictions.

Fig8: Percent of households facing challenges to access markets in the last six months by governorate

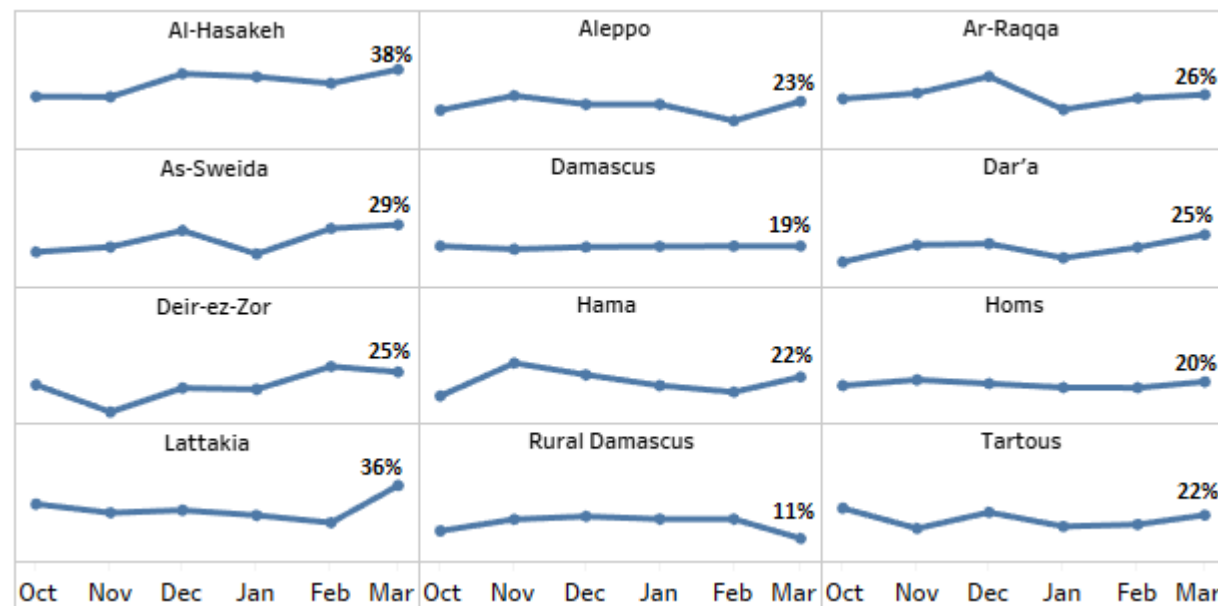
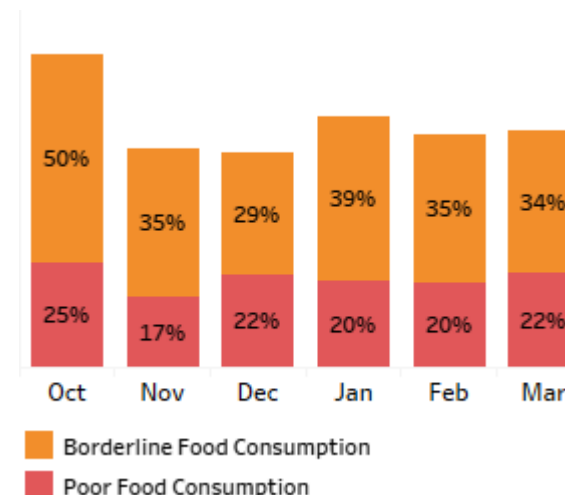


Fig7: Share of households with inadequate food consumption who reported facing difficulties in accessing markets



Map3: Percent of households facing challenges to access markets by governorate in March 2021

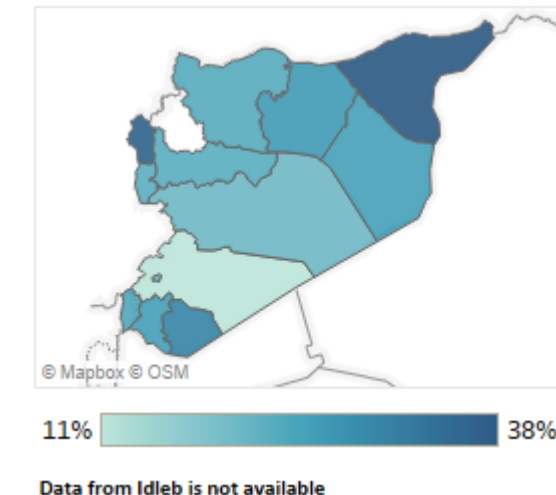
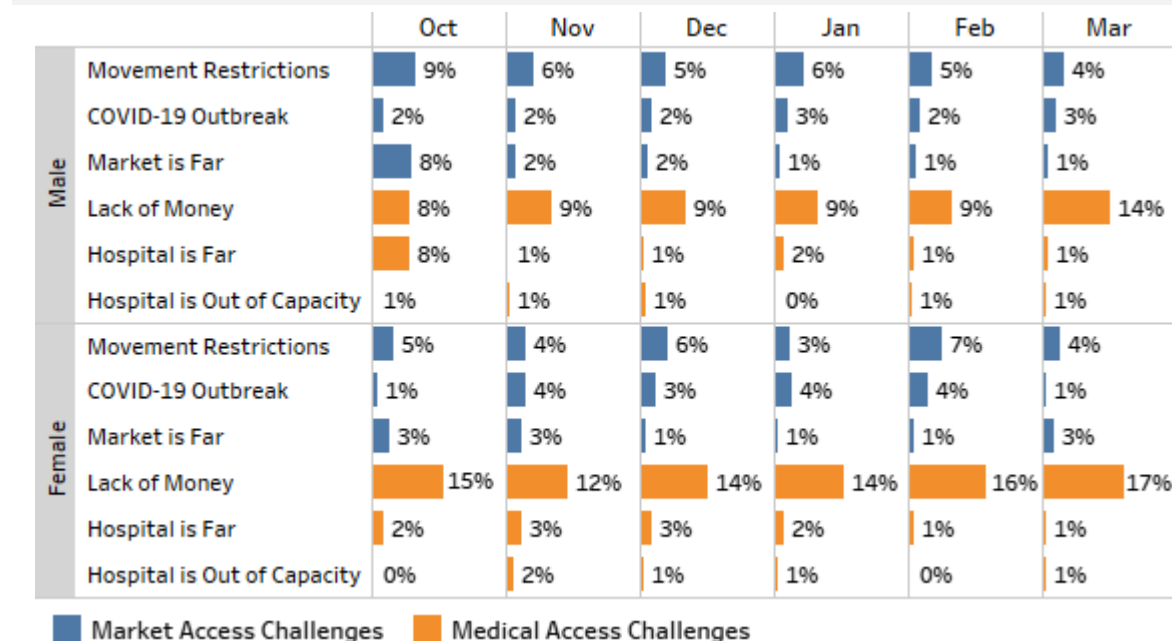


Fig9: Respondents' reported reasons why accessing markets and medical services was challenging

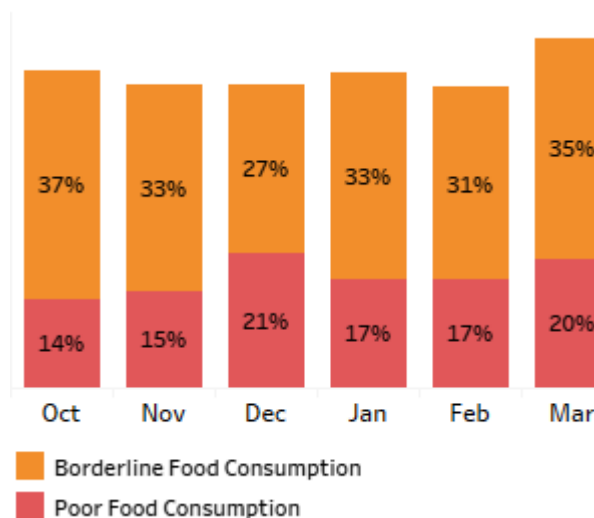




COVID-19 Situation Overview II

- In March 2021, 18 percent of interviewed households reported facing challenges in accessing medical care services, an increase by four percentage points since February 2021, with a peak recorded in Quneitra (27 percent). More female-headed households (21 percent) reported challenges, mainly due to shortage of financial means (17 percent). According to residency status, 24 percent of returnees, 18 percent of IDPs and 17 percent of residents indicated difficulties in accessing healthcare facilities (an increase of nine percentage points from the previous month's level). Lack of money was the main impediment to accessing healthcare facilities by returnees (19 percent), while around four percent of returnees reported that hospitals were far away from their homes. In March 2021, 66 percent of surveyed households with no regular access to medical healthcare reported poor or borderline food consumption, marking a 10 percent increase compared to the level recorded in February 2021. Moreover, two out of five interviewed households reported not being able to purchase the necessary medicines in March 2021, a 21 percent increase from a month earlier, mainly due to lack of financial resources (84 percent) and shortage of medicines in pharmacies (14 percent). This highlights a health concern given that 17 percent of respondents throughout Syria have elderly members with chronic diseases.
- In light of the worsening socio-economic situation across the country, Syrian households reported continued difficulties in sustaining income generating activities. In March 2021, 43 percent of surveyed households indicated that they had lost one or more sources of income. This was the case even among breadwinners having university degrees (38 percent). Additionally, a third of interviewed households in Syria indicated having lost more than half of their monthly income.
- At the governorate level, in March 2021, As-Sweida (59 percent) and Ar-Raqqa (47 percent) recorded the highest proportion of surveyed households having lost one or more sources of income. Almost 14 percent of surveyed households in As-Sweida and 12 percent in Ar-Raqqa lost almost all their income for March. Furthermore, more than half of the interviewed households across Syria who mentioned losses of income (55 percent) reported inadequate food consumption and 94 percent indicated having relied on at least one coping strategy in March 2021.

Fig10: Percent of households with inadequate food consumption who reported having lost their main income source



Map4: Percent of households facing challenges to access medical services by governorate in March 2021

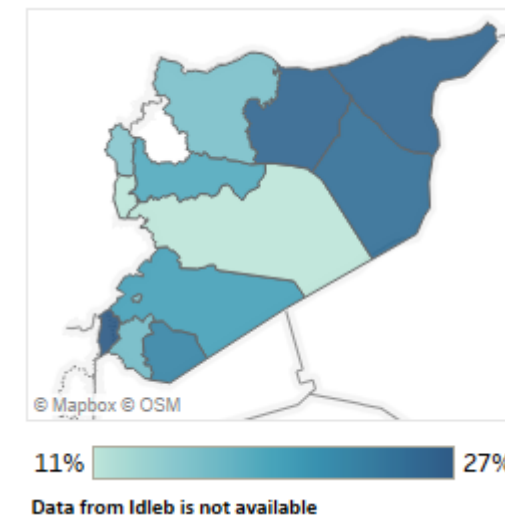
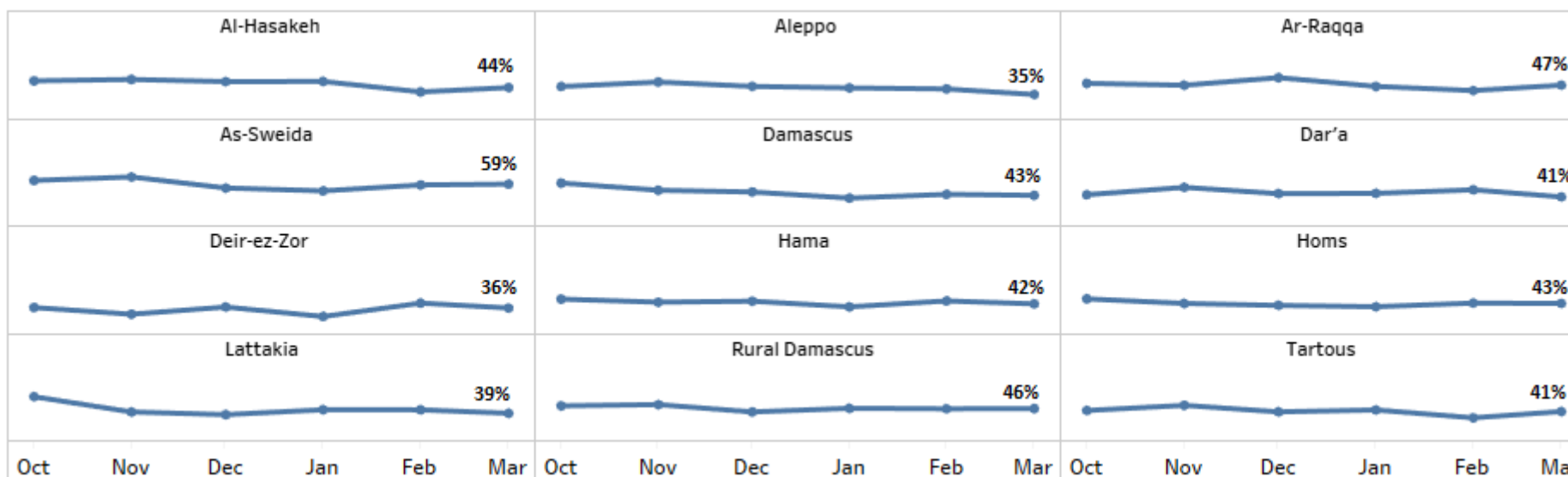


Fig11: Percent of households losing one or more sources of income in the last six months by governorate



Map5: Percent of households reporting losing more than half of their income sources in March 2021

