

**Focus:** Security incidents, smuggling activity, governance, and social conditions in the Syrian side of the Semalka border area, centered near Khanik village (10–15 km radius)

## Overview

The Semalka area, located in Syria's far northeast near the village of Khanik, serves as the Syrian side of the Semalka (Faysh Khabur) border crossing into Iraq's Kurdistan Region. Though often associated with the crossing itself, this area encompasses a small but strategically important zone of settlements, administrative facilities, security posts, and logistics support. It is managed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and plays a key role in facilitating trade, humanitarian access, and civilian travel. The local dynamics are deeply shaped by border politics, regional military tensions, smuggling networks, and the presence of multiple Kurdish factions.

## Security conditions in and around Semalka town

The Semalka area has remained mostly free from direct kinetic conflict over the past two years. There have been no reported armed clashes, IED attacks, or organized militant operations within or immediately surrounding the Syrian side of the crossing. The zone is tightly controlled by the Asayish, the internal security force of the AANES, which maintains checkpoints and patrols throughout the area.

**No confirmed reports were found of direct armed clashes, IEDs, terrorist attacks, or militia-on-militia violence specifically at or within 10–15 km of the Semalka crossing in the 2023–2025 window.**

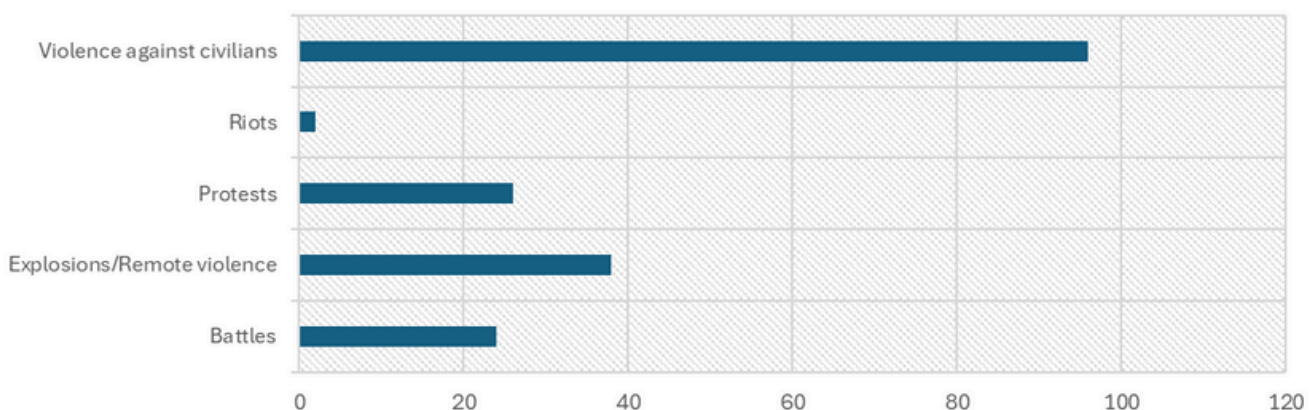
**No ISIS activity, tribal violence, or prolonged firefights were recorded in the border villages around Semalka itself.**

This likely reflects:

- The high control and low population density of the immediate Semalka zone.
- The tight border coordination between KRG and AANES to prevent such incidents at a politically sensitive point.

However, the area remains politically sensitive, and individuals traveling to or from Iraq may be detained or questioned if suspected of affiliations with the PKK or other groups deemed controversial by KRG or Turkish authorities.

## Categories of political violence in broader region: Al-Hasakeh [Jan-Apr 2025]



## Crime, smuggling, and enforcement

The Semalka area is a known hub for informal trade and smuggling, especially during periods when the official crossing is closed. Goods such as fuel, cigarettes, livestock, and sometimes people are believed to move through informal channels near the river or across rural terrain surrounding the checkpoint.

- March 2024: Iraqi guards opened fire on suspected smugglers south of Semalka, killing one Syrian and wounding another.
- July 2024: Eight Syrians from Hasakah were detained while attempting to cross into Iraq illegally near the Semalka area.

These incidents point to a persistent smuggling economy, often managed through clan-based or localized networks. The Asayish conduct intermittent raids and detentions but typically avoid high-profile enforcement unless linked to political cases or outside intervention.

Governance and civil administration

The Semalka area is administered by the AANES Jazira Region, with municipal functions coordinated from Al-Malikiyah and implemented locally near Khanik. PYD-aligned councils and security services oversee operations. The Asayish maintain a continuous presence, managing checkpoints, screening traffic, and handling disputes.

Governance is strict but stable. There have been no recent reports of protests or civil unrest, and the local population generally complies with regulations, prioritizing access to cross-border trade over political expression.

Civilian impact and population dynamics

Semalka has seen modest population shifts tied to border access and regional instability, but no large-scale displacement or humanitarian emergency has occurred within the town itself in the past two years.

- During the late 2024 Turkish airstrikes on NE Syria, hundreds of families displaced from Afrin and the Shahba region transited through AANES territory, but few settled in Semalka.
- When the border crossing was closed between May–June 2023 and again in December 2024, Semalka experienced temporary economic strain. Locals reported shortages of essential goods such as infant formula and medical supplies, though these disruptions eased quickly after partial or full reopening.
- The January 2025 expansion of border operations improved local trade flow and reduced household-level anxiety, with town officials resuming a more regular market and transportation schedule.

Semalka's stability has largely depended on continued coordination between AANES security services and the KRG authorities across the river. Though political tensions remain high, both sides have shown an interest in avoiding escalation within the border towns themselves.

Outlook

The Semalka area remains stable but exposed to regional pressures. Its role as a logistical and political chokepoint makes it vulnerable to sudden shifts in AANES–KRG relations or Turkish military posture. The absence of kinetic violence is notable, but smuggling, surveillance, and political screening remain persistent features of life near the crossing.

Going forward, the area's security will depend on:

- Maintaining AANES–KRG coordination
- Avoiding spillover from regional conflict
- Managing border economy without over-militarization

Despite tensions, the Semalka area has proven to be a resilient point of controlled connectivity in a volatile region.

Timeline of notable developments at Semalka BXP

FEB 2023

KRG (KDP) reportedly blocks earthquake aid from crossing at Semalka under Turkish pressure. No violence, but spurs protests in AANES.

MAY 11, 2023

KRG suddenly closes Semalka crossing with “no reason” given. All trade/travel halted – humanitarian concerns rise. Semalka businesses report stock shortages.

JUN 5, 2023

Semalka is partially reopened for limited humanitarian cases, including medical patients and NGO staff. Commercial traffic remains restricted for several more weeks.

OCT 25, 2023

Kurdish journalist Suleiman Ahmed is arrested by KRG security forces at Semalka on charges related to alleged PKK activity. His detention raises human rights concerns. Political tensions ripple across AANES border communities.

MAR 19, 2024

Iraqi border guards open fire on suspected Syrian smugglers near Tel Kocher (south of Semalka), killing one and wounding another. Increased border patrols near Semalka.

JUL 10, 2024

Arrests of Syrians attempting unauthorized crossing reflect smuggling pressure in town's periphery.

EARLY DEC 2024

Turkey launches regional strikes; aid convoys blocked; Semalka sees economic strain and logistical disruption.

JAN 2025

Funeral convoy for slain Kurdish journalists passes through Semalka; blocked by Turkey; symbolic importance noted by residents. Town officials confirm expansion of Semalka operations to 6 days/week, easing economic pressure.

APR 2025

Crossing remains open and stable. No recent clashes, but political tensions persist and could re-emerge at the border.