

Syria Update

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Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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No Peace for the Dammed: Alarming Water Scarcity in Northeast Syria

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Low water levels in the Euphrates River. Image courtesy of Hawar News.

> **M**arking yet another alarming episode in an

increasingly worrying trend, the waters of the Euphrates River have declined to **critically low levels**. Drops measured in the past ten days range from three meters at the Euphrates Dam to five meters in the vicinity of Ar-Raqqa. Levels have reached such lows that the hydroelectric potential of the Tishreen Dam has significantly **diminished**, leading to power blackouts across northeastern Syria and associated unease around agricultural production and public health. With transboundary flow rates now at half the amount specified by the **1987** Syria-Turkey water sharing agreement, many commentators claim that Turkey has deliberately heightened dam impoundment to destabilise its Kurdish rivals downstream. The reality, however, is that Syria's emerging water crisis is not entirely a matter of hydropolitics and is rather more environmental in its origin and effects. Indeed, the scale of environmental issues linked to current shortages are so substantial as to spell an extended period of concern for both Syria and the region as a whole.

Immediate impacts

Reduced discharge into the Euphrates has placed heightened pressure on rural livelihoods, potable water availability, and power generation across the northeast for some time. The latest shortages have prompted urgent action however. The Autonomous Administration's Power and Telecommunication Bureau **announced** that electricity would be reduced from 16 to 8 hours per day from 29 April, and that water

... the scale of environmental issues linked to current shortages are so substantial as to spell an extended period of concern for both Syria and the region as a whole.

pumps and wheat mills would be prioritised for available supply. As a result, the majority of communities in northeast Syria have been left without electricity for extended periods, with local sources reporting that neighborhoods in Al-Hasakeh city currently receive just one to two hours of power daily. Concern has also been expressed regarding increased reliance on potentially unsafe water sources, the financial burden of water trucking services, and the risks posed to efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19.

In agriculture, water-intensive crops like wheat and cotton are likely to suffer heavily from prolonged water and power shortages. Considerable summer cropping losses are anticipated, and pessimism over yields are not helped by the dilapidated state of regional irrigation infrastructure and generally poor environmental management. Reduced agricultural output is only likely to push even more farmers away from the profession, increase rates of rural-urban migration, and prompt more widespread use of negative coping strategies. Whether this results in worsened regional — or even national — food insecurity remains to be seen, but all signs point to significant production shortfalls and, in all likelihood, an even more

intense annual scramble for wheat between the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration.

Beyond hydropolitics

Blame for Syria's current predicament has been widely laid at the feet of Turkey. It is alleged to have capitalised on its upstream position to secure its own water needs at a time of reduced domestic rainfall and, simultaneously, to destabilise its political opponents downriver. Such allegations appear to have considerable basis in truth. In a now long-running episode, Turkish-backed armed groups are **accused** of having **repeatedly** compromised Al-Hasakeh's water infrastructure since Operation Peace Spring was concluded 18 months ago. Many therefore assume that the waters of the Euphrates have once again been weaponised in service of Turkey's national security interests and its opposition to the Autonomous Administration. In the context of current shortages however, the moral and international legal consequences arising from such conduct would likely represent an insupportable diplomatic liability over a prolonged period — and especially at a time when Turkey is seeking to repair its tattered regional and international reputation. It is therefore unsurprising that water levels have



Children queue for water in Al-Hasakeh. Image courtesy of Al-Araby.

reportedly picked up to the point that the northeast's hydroelectric dams are now running more smoothly compared with last week, albeit at minimum capacity.

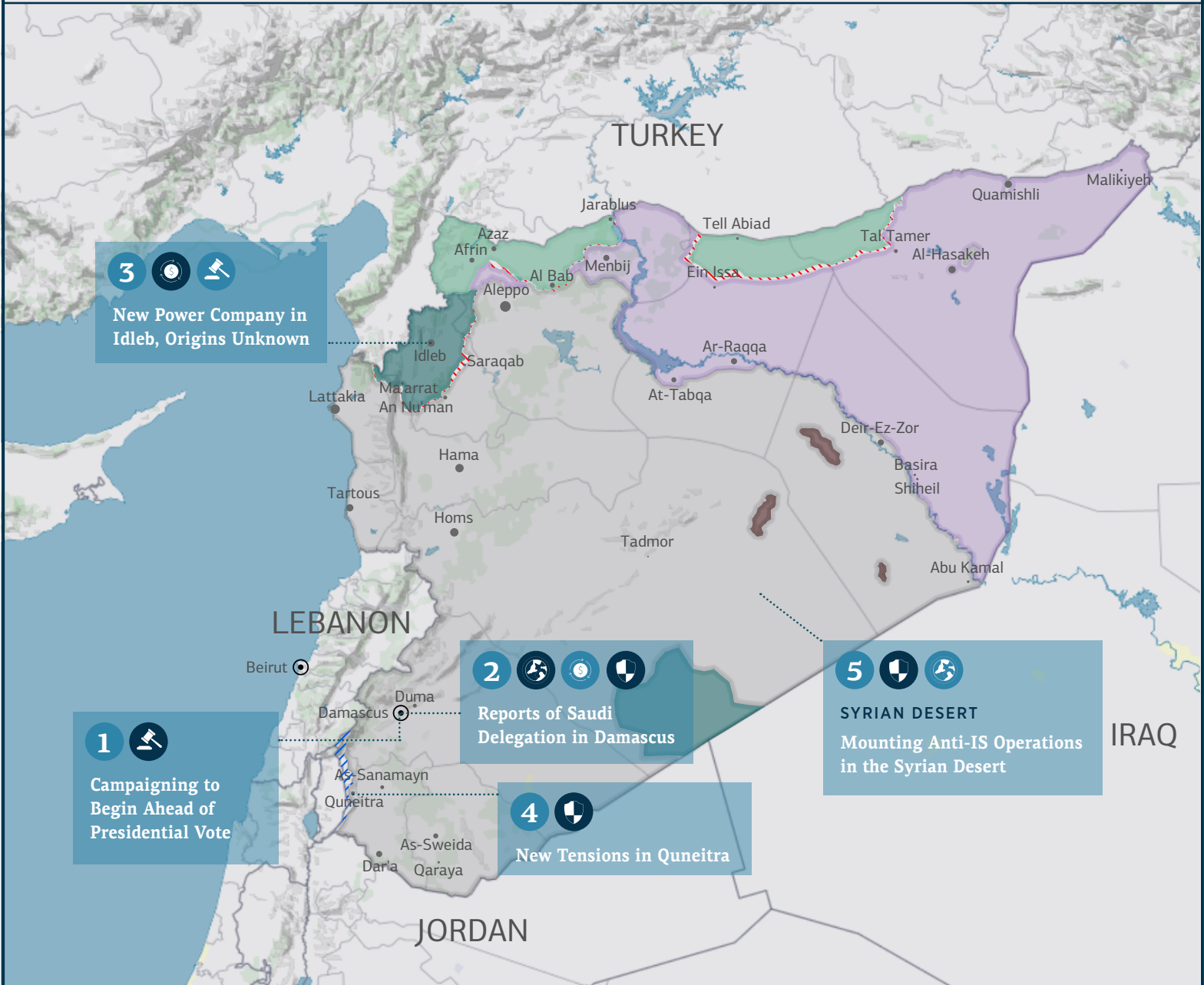
Regardless of the extent to which Turkey plays a role in current (and future) shortages, there remains an urgent need to move beyond hydropolitics and address the domestic effects of climate change, water overexploitation and mismanagement, and groundwater pollution in the Euphrates Basin. Much recent **reporting** has described springtime water shortfalls in the northeast as merely a result of Turkish policy, effectively **dismissing** other contributory factors such as infrastructural inefficiencies, increased salinisation and decades of unsustainable resource use. That **Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria** are each expected to face water shortages over the coming months owing to a poor rainy season has also been widely ignored. Were these factors taken into account, recent events on the Euphrates might instead be viewed as a symptom of a troubling environmental

outlook which demands concerted attention. Increased transboundary competition for water is inevitable in the current climate and will naturally trigger diplomatic debate. The challenge will be to navigate this terrain whilst simultaneously delivering the array of sustainable resource solutions that might help alleviate further humanitarian and developmental crises in the northeast and elsewhere in Syria. ❄️

Syria Update

“ ... international attention must focus itself on planning for another term of Al-Assad and the approaches necessary to sustain support to the Syrian population... ”

See: Point No. 1 Below



Community Size

Greater than 1,000,000 Less than 1,000

Humanitarian Issues	Social	Security	Regional Intervention	Economy	Governance

- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Islamic State (IS)
- Turkish-backed opposition groups
- Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs)
- Government of Syria (GoS)



Campaigning to Begin Ahead of Presidential Vote

DAMASCUS


On 4 May 2021, Syria's Supreme Constitutional Court announced it had accepted the applications of three candidates for the country's forthcoming presidential election. Speaking at a press **conference**, the head of the court, Mohammad Jihad al-Lahham, **confirmed** that only Bashar al-Assad, Abdullah Salloum Abdullah, and Mahmoud Ahmad Mar'ai had met the necessary constitutional and legal criteria to run for office. Although six prospective candidates lodged **appeals** before the court's 7 May deadline, none had been successful at the time of writing and a final declaration as to the validity of the three named candidates is anticipated shortly. A final supreme court declaration will mark the official beginning of electoral campaigning ahead of the 26 May vote.

Beyond a foregone conclusion

If any further evidence were needed, the court's approval of two relatively obscure political opponents points to another widely expected victory for Al-Assad. He will contest a former cabinet minister in Abdallah, and the leader of a small state-sanctioned opposition party in Mar'ai. Despite any purported claims of legitimacy their involvement may evoke from the current government, neither

will be under any illusions as to their prospects.

In responding to the court's candidacy announcement, **Former President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces** Moaz al-Khatib, stated that "the upcoming presidential elections are a regional and international political game to resurrect the regime and give it the legitimacy it never had." Impartial observers will find such claims difficult to refute, and the announcement of another general **amnesty** certain categories of currency speculators, petty criminals, and wanted military recruits will do little to sway the mood. There remain no plans to extend voting rights to residents in areas outside government control, and only a select few will be permitted to vote from abroad via certain Syrian embassies.

Drawing criticism from Russia, several Western countries have already stated that they **will not recognise** the outcome of the election, given that the process fundamentally ignores conditions established by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Western complaints as to the intransigence of the Syrian Government on transitional governance and free and fair elections may be justified. Yet, with the election result seemingly a foregone conclusion, international actors must ultimately look beyond condemnation. As COAR wrote in **April**, international attention must focus itself on planning for another term of Al-Assad and the approaches necessary to sustain and expand support to the Syrian population at a time of acute and chronic need. 



Reports of Saudi Delegation in Damascus

DAMASCUS

After years of frozen diplomatic relations, several reports have claimed that a senior Saudi delegation **travelled** to Damascus on 3 May. According to these accounts, the meeting brought together the two countries' most senior security officials: President al-Assad's special security advisor Ali Mamlouk and Khaled Al-Humaidan, the Saudi head of intelligence. A Saudi Foreign Ministry official has since **denied** that any such meeting took place and the Syrian Government has yet to comment. However, regardless of whether formal discussions between the two parties have occurred, speculation around Saudi-Syrian engagement is rising. A large illegal drug shipment stopped by the Saudis in late April likely **originated in Syria** and marks yet another **instance** in which drugs have been intercepted en route to the Gulf. Addressing the drug issue may be a step too far given the extent to which narcotics have become a key commodity in Syria (see COAR's **The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narcostate**), but a range of other political and security issues are likely on the table as mutual geopolitical interests steadily align.

Mutual interest

There are two reasons to suspect that renewed Saudi-Syrian

diplomacy is in the Saudi interest. First, there appears to be a broader trend toward increased Saudi diplomacy on Iran, with the Saudis recently meeting with Iranian officials in Iraq “to ease ongoing tensions.” In this context, any Saudi engagement of Damascus represents another step towards reducing tensions with the regional Iranian axis. Second, and relatedly, Saudi engagement with Syria would reflect Western efforts to reduce tensions with Iran at a time when its own image in the West has been tarnished. The Khashoggi affair, Saudi intervention in Yemen, and other clandestine activities targeting Western states have all undermined the standing of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in recent times. A more reconciliatory Saudi policy on Syria would chime well with the Biden administration’s cautious engagement of Iran, perhaps helping restore some Saudi credibility in Washington and other Western capitals.

For Syria, deeper ties with Saudi Arabia would bring it one step closer to returning to the Arab League. Further work is, of course, necessary. Despite securing the UAE’s **approval**, Syria must still convince other key members that its readmission is appropriate. Saudi consent would provide new impetus for Syria’s return to the regional fold, thereby strengthening Syrian efforts to wrestle back some autonomy from its wartime backers and lower other outstanding barriers to Arab League membership. Improved relations with a wealthy neighbor are also beneficial during an unprecedented economic crisis which is at least partly fueled by Syria’s political

and economic isolation. Damascus will have welcomed the 3 May **reopening** of two border posts linking Syria with Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf via Jordan; and the event naturally provides a platform for more detailed discussion on matters of trade and investment.

Significant obstacles to more diverse Saudi-Syrian diplomacy nevertheless remain. Europe and the US maintain robust sanction regimes against Syria, and there are presently few signs that either party is about to change tack. Under these conditions, any economic benefits anticipated as a result of a Syrian rapprochement with Saudi Arabia may therefore fail to translate into meaningful economic recovery and reconstruction support. For the time being, little more should be expected beyond security-related Syrian-Saudi coordination behind closed doors. Longer term, however, some form of public engagement between the two countries appears probable. In the event of Syria’s evolved geopolitical standing, the effectiveness of policies that seek Syria’s continued political and economic isolation may steadily erode. 🌐



New Power Company in Idleb, Origins Unknown

IDLEB


On 5 May, a previously unknown utility company, Green Energy, announced via social media that it had begun **supplying**

power to Idleb city and surrounding communities, including Salqin, Dana and Sarmada. It is understood that relatively substantial power infrastructure rehabilitation work was undertaken prior to the commencement of service, and that the installation of electric cables to supply these and other locations is ongoing. Green Energy reportedly plans to expand its services across the region, pending further infrastructure development. Over the weekend, the company’s General Manager **stated** that service users will pay installation and connection fees in Turkish lira. One-off meter installation costs reportedly begin at 350 lira, with monthly service charges coming in at 100 lira. Commercial pricing is roughly 10% higher than the domestic per unit.

Turkish network integration

After emerging suddenly over the past week, details as to the origins of Green Energy are steadily beginning to surface. In March 2020, the Salvation Government’s General Electricity Corporation stated that it would soon oversee the delivery of power by an unnamed Turkish supplier. Notably, the individual responsible for the Green Energy pricing announcement is the former director of this Salvation Government department, Omar Shaqrouq. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Green Energy is that aforementioned supplier, and that it has been working via Shaqrouq to develop service provision in partnership with the Salvation Government for some time. Who exactly is financing Green Energy’s operations and where its profits will accrue remains unclear however.

Idleb’s population will likely welcome the opportunity to

purchase a more reliable utility given widespread reliance on alternative power sources. The electricity itself is almost certainly exported cross-border from Turkey and will offer a cheaper alternative to fuel-based generators. More broadly, confirmation of Idleb's steady incorporation of the Turkish power network would point to the continued deployment of Turkey's domestic state apparatus to Syrian territory. After the near ubiquitous adoption of the Turkish lira across Idleb, it would mark another step towards the Salvation Government's disentanglement from Syria proper. Looking ahead, such forms of integration will be hard to shake off for a region in which longer-term investment from non-Turkish sources is presently unforeseeable. 



New Tensions in Quneitra


QUNEITRA

On 1 May, media sources reported that Syrian Military Intelligence units had surrounded Um Batna, Quneitra Governorate, to suppress local anti-Government militants. The move came after an attack on a Syrian Government military position in the vicinity of Jaba, in which gunmen killed four Government servicemen and injured several others. Local and media sources have claimed that Russia facilitated a series of meetings between the Syrian Government's Security Committee,

Quneitra notables, and the Dar'a Central Committee to reduce tensions in Um Batna — but the parties have reportedly failed to reach an agreement. Local parties have resisted Syrian Government demands that they surrender several individuals for resettlement to Syria's north, instead calling for the release of detainees and a wider de-escalation across Quneitra Governorate. Meanwhile, on 7 May, Israel reportedly targeted a Hezbollah military position in Jbata Elkhashab, northern Quneitra. Later, Israeli planes dropped flyers over the area warning against continued Syrian Government cooperation with Hezbollah-linked militias in the south.

Quneitra still part of southern turmoil

Rising tensions in Quneitra are a reminder that instability in southern Syria is not limited to Dar'a Governorate (see: [Syria Update 6 April 2021](#)). It is also worth noting that the causes of disturbance in Quneitra are subtly different. Heightened sensitivities arising from the proximity of the Israeli border mean fragile relations between the Syrian Government and local communities, a weaker state security presence, and a more volatile brand of Iran-linked influence are potentially more explosive. Israel's repeated targeting of the region points to its continued

sense of insecurity on the border and the Syrian Government's wider failure to bring the region to heel. For the time being, no significant change is anticipated, and the kind of standoffs seen recently in Um Batna are likely to remain a feature of the local security environment. 



Mounting Anti-IS Operations in the Syrian Desert

SYRIAN DESERT

On 3 May, Russian jets launched over 50 airstrikes against Islamic State (IS) cells east of Hama in the Syrian desert. Russian forces undertook subsequent searches for IS operatives in this area, as well as across the Aleppo–Hama–Ar-Raqqa triangle, the Deir Ezzor/Ar-Raqqa border, and other areas in eastern rural Homs.

These operations were followed by reports that Syrian Government forces and their allies were preparing for a large-scale anti-IS campaign in rural parts of the Hama and Ar-Raqqa governorates. Military convoys dispatched by the Government's 11th Division, the

Some kind of visible anti-IS response is therefore becoming increasingly necessary, and is likely a key driver of the reported military build-up in the desert.

Suhail al-Hassan-led 25th Division (Tiger Forces), the Russian-backed Fifth Corps, and Liwa al-Quds are believed to have travelled to the Syrian desert. If a serious military sweeping exercise is launched, continued Russian air support is highly likely.

Protecting public confidence

These reported preparations for Government-led anti-IS operations appear to represent a concerted response to an uptick in attacks by the group since the start of the year. Opportunistic assaults, killings, and kidnappings have taken place with growing frequency in the Syrian desert and beyond; many of these attacks have targeted Syrian Government forces. Most recently, on 2 May, IS members **reportedly** killed four Government soldiers and injured eight others in an attack near Tadmor (Palmyra). The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast have also been hit in recent weeks. Despite almost daily Russian airstrikes against IS positions in the desert, they represent a clear and continued threat to public safety and the stability of Syria's various authorities.

Last month, IS fighters carried out a surprise attack on Syrian Government forces, **abducting** 19 people, mostly civilians, from the town of As-Saan in Hama. Besides unacceptable losses for its own forces, such incidents represent a serious public legitimacy issue for the Syrian Government. Some kind of visible anti-IS response is therefore becoming increasingly necessary, and is likely a key driver of the reported military build-up in the desert. IS cells operate predominantly in remote and

sparsely populated areas, however, and their eradication is far from guaranteed. It is highly likely that the group will continue its hit-and-run tactics. ❄️

>> Open Source Annex

The Open Source Annex highlights key media reports, research, and primary documents that are not examined in the Syria Update. For a continuously updated collection of such records, searchable by geography, theme, and conflict actor — and curated to meet the needs of decision-makers — please see COAR’s comprehensive online search platform [Alexandrina](#). Note: These records are solely the responsibility of their creators. COAR does not necessarily endorse — or confirm — the viewpoints expressed by these sources.

Aid for the Needy, Charitable Funds for the System

What Does it Say? The food security situation in Syria is dire, with around 70 percent of the population assessed as food insecure.

Reading Between the Lines: With food prices reportedly 33 times higher than before the conflict, food insecurity is only likely to increase with the Syrian economy in freefall.

Source: [Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [4 May 2021](#)

‘Autonomous Administration’: A Judicial Introduction to Understanding the Model and the Experience

What Does it Say? This study examines the Autonomous Administration’s model of governance, with a focus on the judiciary.

Reading Between the Lines: The northeast’s patchwork of tribes and ethnicities continue to pose substantial problems of governance to the Autonomous Administration.

Source: [Omran for Strategic Studies](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [29 April 2021](#)

Syria: The Black Hole for Media Work; 10 years of Violations

What Does it Say? The article focuses on violations against media organisations and media professionals in Syria over the last decade.

Reading Between the Lines: Nationwide violations against press freedoms require action by a range of domestic and international stakeholders.

Source: [Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [May 2021](#)

>> Open Source Annex Continued

Correcting Perceptions: OCHA and ‘Early Recovery’!

What Does it Say? The author argues that, in the Syrian context, the prioritisation of early recovery initiatives is not appropriate.

Reading Between the Lines: Conditions for early recovery are undoubtedly problematic in Syria. Approaches like the nexus promise greater sensitivity, but their practical application is underdeveloped in conflict-affected settings.

Source: [Syria TV](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [26 April 2021](#)

Recovering the Local Economy in Northern Aleppo: Reality and Challenges

What Does it Say? This article explores the complex economic situation of northern Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: Exploration of Aleppo’s atomised wartime economy reveals communities are subject to seemingly irrepressible forces of clientelism, corruption, and extremism. It is likely that only extensive international support will be sufficient to mitigate these dynamics.

Source: [European University Institute \(Middle East Directions\)](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [March 2021](#)

Migration Management: New EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

What Does it Say? The EU has adopted a new refugee returns strategy oriented towards voluntary returns. It also seeks to improve the quality of returns procedures by strengthening legal and operational frameworks.

Reading Between the Lines: Truly voluntary returns are preferable and the EU’s approach is welcome. Syria, however, remains unsafe for the great majority of refugees and host country policies must not create conditions which prompt pseudo-voluntary return outcomes.

Source: [European Commission](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [27 April 2021](#)

Northwest Syria - Funding Gap Analysis (April-June 2021)

What Does it Say? A chart showing gaps in humanitarian funding for Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: If donors were in any doubt, finance gaps for needs in Syria are large, in most cases, and spread across practically all sectors.

Source: [UNOCHA](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [25 April 2021](#)

Legal Barriers to Participation of Refugees in Syria’s Presidential Elections

What Does it Say? Syrian legal codes, including the constitution, do not refer to refugee participation in the general electoral process. They do permit refugee participation in Syria’s presidential elections however.

Reading Between the Lines: Barriers to refugee involvement in the presidential elections are unlawful and undermine the legitimacy of Syria’s political process.

Source: [London School of Economics](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [April 2021](#)

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