

# Syria Update

Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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## Amid Violence, Syria's Presidential Election Kicks off in Lebanon

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Syrians in Lebanon queue to vote absentee in Syria's presidential election. Image courtesy of Syrian Arab News Agency.

**I**ntercommunal tensions between Syrians and the host community in Lebanon reached a troubling flashpoint on 20 May amid **violent partisan attacks** on Syrians participating from abroad in their country's presidential election. **Multiple video** clips circulated on social media **showing** groups of Lebanese violently confronting Syrians — in some cases hurling stones and smashing vehicles — as they made their way to cast ballots at the Syrian Embassy outside Beirut. Some of the most intense incidents took place north of the Lebanese capital in Kesrouane District, a predominantly Christian area that is a hub of the Lebanese Forces political party. Dozens of Lebanese Forces supporters reportedly blocked the Nahr El Kalb-Jounieh highway and launched into attacks on cars and buses filled with Syrians holding pictures of President Bashar al-Assad or Syrian national flags — a move that was seen by some as a deliberate provocation by al-Assad's supporters in the country. Other incidents were recorded in Jabal Mohsen and Sassine Square in Beirut, where a convoy of pro-Assad Syrians was **attacked** and multiple vehicles were destroyed.


The violence came one day after Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese Forces and a prominent figure within Lebanon's political firmament, condemned the Syrian election and **stated** that Syrians who vote for al-Assad from Lebanon have no credible basis for protection concerns inside Syria and should therefore return to their country. The incidents and Geagea's statement do not necessarily signal a paradigm shift concerning Syrian refugees in Lebanon — popular pressures have long been high — but they

do show that the terms of debate may be changing. In the past, intercommunal tensions and violent events between Lebanese and Syrians were triggered primarily by personal disputes, labour issues, and other contingent factors. Violence surrounding the Syrian election is now a likely sign that refugees in the country will be forced to contend with social pressure on a widening, partisan basis as well.

Although some Syrians in Lebanon do support al-Assad, it is crucial to note that the community as a whole has been pressured to re-elect the current Syrian president. Before the elections, **concern had been raised** over the coercive influence exercised during a voter drive by pro-Government of Syria entities in Lebanon. Among other things, these groups bussed Syrians to the polls and were accused of **threatening** Syrians over their future access to documentation that may be required for maintaining legal status in Lebanon. UNHCR **confirmed** that Syrian refugees had been subject to intimidation and pressure. More generally, Syrians in the country remain cognisant of the deep reach that Syrian security and intelligence forces have, even across the border. Syria's ambassador in Lebanon expected more than 200,000 Syrians to **register to vote** in the country.

Worryingly, a victory by al-Assad will likely increase the social pressure on all Syrians in Lebanon, irrespective of their political or ideological leanings. Al-Assad is now the presumptive victor in an upcoming election in which he faces only managed opposition. As an incumbent, al-Assad claimed 88.7 percent of the vote in the last election, in 2014. Such an outcome in the upcoming vote will further

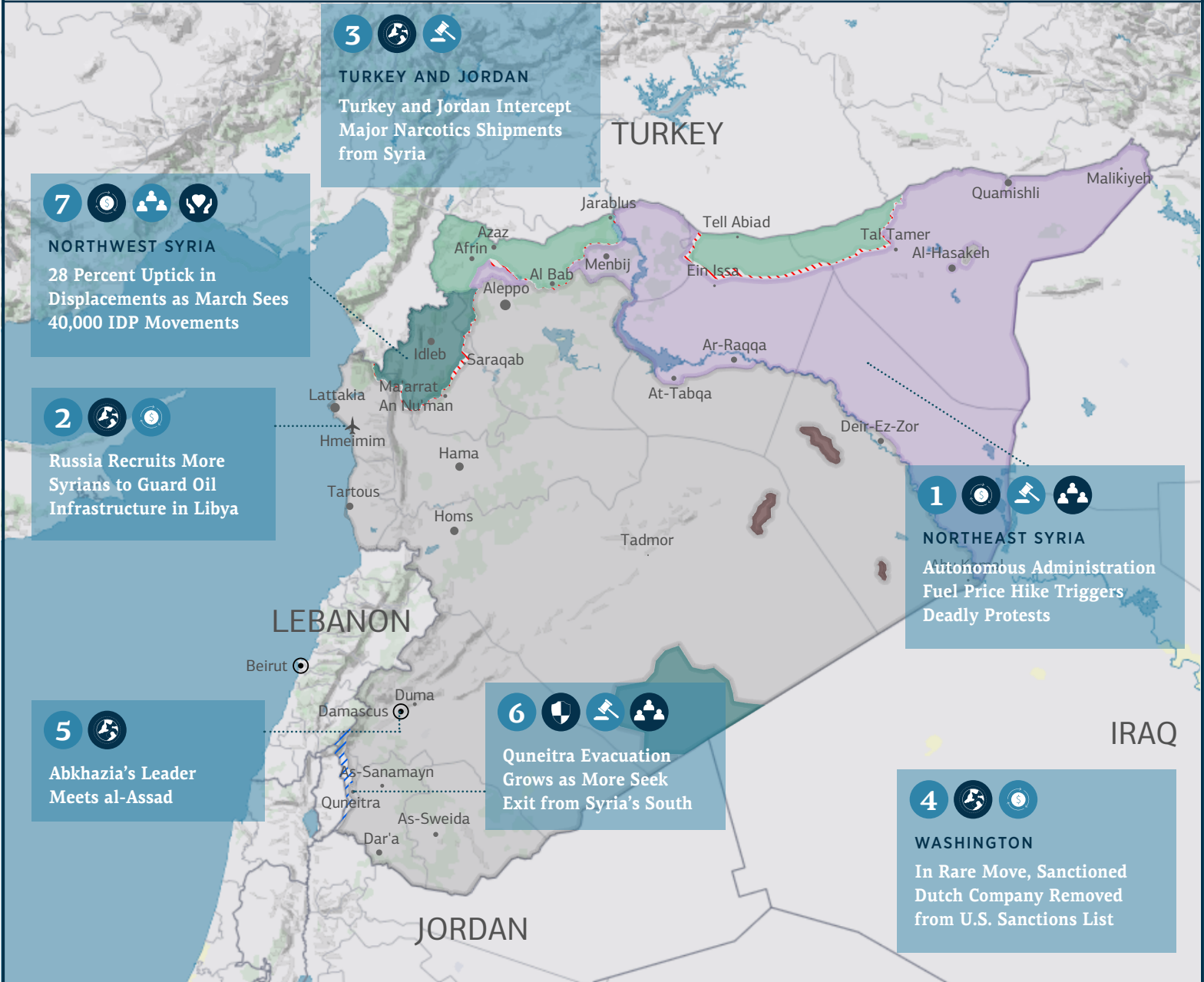
the impression that a large majority of Syrians in Lebanon also support al-Assad. Particularly given the pressures on Syrians, it is wrong to equate a vote for al-Assad with actual support for Syria's ruling regime. Yet that nuance is likely to be lost, especially in Lebanon, where a political and economic implosion has aggravated social frictions of all types. The latest violence may normalise violence against Syrians in Lebanon or increase tensions among Syrians of various political persuasions.

Voting in Government of Syria territory will take place on 26 May, setting off a process that will likely deepen Syria's international isolation (see: **Syria Update 19 April 2021**). A chorus of international actors and opposition figures, both internal and external, has condemned the election. Hassan Abdel Azim, the president of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria, **said** that the vote is no more than window dressing. The Syrian Democratic Council has announced that it is "not concerned" with the election, and no voting will take place in Autonomous Administration areas, nor in Syria's northwest. More notably, on 24 May, a group of local committees and notables in Government-held southern Syria circulated a statement declaring their refusal to participate in an election process in which the Syrian people lack genuine agency. Their statement is a repudiation of superficial conciliatory measures by the Government of Syria, as relative stability in Dar'a city in recent months has been in part attributed to the Government's interest in limiting visible dissent ahead of the election. 

# Syria Update

“ Whether they are recruited to foreign battlefields or outposts inside Syria, Syrian fighters often face more dangerous conditions than advertised and receive less money than promised for their efforts. ”

See: Point No. 2 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)



## Autonomous Administration Fuel Price Hike Triggers Deadly Protests

NORTHEAST SYRIA


Several protesters were reported killed on 18 May as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sought to break up spontaneous public demonstrations that erupted in response to a dramatic hike in fuel prices by the Autonomous Administration. At least one protester **was killed** and several were injured by live fire as security forces attempted to disperse crowds in Hasakah city. Local media **reported** additional deaths following a protest in Shadadi. Further demonstrations **were recorded** in Quamishli, where shopkeepers also **went on strike**, and in southern Deir-ez-Zor, where protesters obstructed roads. Division has broken out among Kurdish officials over the considerable price hikes, and some have called for their reversal in a bid to quell tensions. The price of cooking gas cylinders was raised from 2,500 SYP to 8,000 SYP, while the litre price of petrol was raised from 150 SYP to 400 SYP.

### Northeast Syria's oil prompts deep mystery, deeper misery

The public outrage reached communities — namely, Quamishli and Hasakah — that are seen as part of the Autonomous Administration's most reliable base. While public demonstrations against regional authorities are common in alienated

areas of Deir-ez-Zor and southern Al-Hasakeh Governorate, they are relatively rare in predominantly Kurdish areas further north. Nonetheless, the demonstrations should not in themselves be seen as a sign that the SDF's support is fraying. The near-trebling of prices for fuel products is a dramatic provocation that was almost guaranteed to raise the ire of immiserated communities. How such a patently explosive measure was implemented at all warrants deep reflection as the Autonomous Administration bids for greater community acceptance. Officials have claimed that the measure is simply a reflection of market realities, owing to the Syrian pound's depreciation and historically generous subsidies, yet such arguments will seem cold comfort to struggling residents.

The incident also invites unwelcome attention to the relationship between the Autonomous Administration, which controls the country's petroleum bounty, and the Government of Syria, which retains much of its refining capacity (see: **Infographic: Northeast Syria Trade Dynamics**). The reality of combined fuel shortages and high prices in oil-producing areas has been a stubborn thorn in the side of Autonomous Administration officials. They have been at pains to quell popular dissent in oil-rich, but poorly serviced communities, as the region's oil is smuggled or transferred with their explicit approval to Government-held areas. For Kurdish leadership, it is a particularly unfortunate coincidence that some 200 oil trucks were seen transporting crude oil to Government of Syria areas even as the news of the latest price hikes sparked general outrage.

The Autonomous Administration enjoys the majority of Syria's oil reserves, but without adequate infrastructure to refine, transport, or market it, these resources heighten the region's interdependence with the Government of Syria, a murky relationship that has raised challenges for community acceptance and the region's broader stabilisation. The lack of official disclosure concerning production or crossline relations has only added made matters worse. 



## Russia Recruits More Syrians to Guard Oil Infrastructure in Libya

HMEIMIM AIRBASE

On 18 May, **media sources** reported that the Russian personnel stationed at Hmeimim Airbase in the eastern Latakia countryside tapped Government of Syria forces and allied militias, including the 5th Corps, to recruit 400 Syrian men from various Syrian governorates to protect oil installations in Libyan territory controlled by militias affiliated with Khalifa Haftar. This new round of recruitment follows the expiration of contracts for 300 fighters, mostly from the 5th Corps, who were previously sent to Libya to fight alongside Haftar against the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), in addition to protecting oil facilities. The new contracts are

divided into two categories: three-month contracts paying 1,200 USD per month and five-month contracts paying 1,300 USD, with an advance of 500 USD for each new recruit.

**A market for mercenaries**

Syria’s economic malaise has increased the pressure on skilled combatants whose experience as fighters has diminished relevance inside Syria as major military operations in the country have cooled. Among foreign powers, Russia and Turkey have thus far been the biggest recruiters (see: [The Syrian economy at war: Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy](#)). The search for sustained livelihoods on the battlefield, or even seed money to start businesses, remains a driving force in Syrians’ decision-making vis-à-vis military mobilisation to foreign battlefields, and among armed groups that continue to recruit inside Syria, albeit for considerably lower wages. The Russian-backed Liwa al-Quds recently recruited 350 young men to fill its ranks after suffering losses in the Syrian desert through attacks and ambushes carried out by Islamic State (IS) cells. Liwa al-Quds offered six-month contracts with a salary of 150,000 Syrian pounds per month (46 USD). The recruits will guard outposts in Tadmor (Palmyra) and Sokhna in eastern Homs Governorate. Whether they are recruited to foreign battlefields or outposts inside Syria, Syrian fighters often face more dangerous conditions than advertised and receive less money than promised for their efforts. The risk of exploitation is amplified by the fact that recruitment is carried out through private security companies or individuals connected to Russian or Turkish forces.



## Turkey and Jordan Intercept Major Narcotics Shipments from Syria

TURKEY AND JORDAN

On 19 May, [media sources](#) reported that three people died in clashes as Jordanian border forces thwarted an attempt to smuggle narcotics and weapons into the country from Syria. Two additional smugglers were wounded and arrested, and six others retreated into Syria. According to [Jordanian media](#), over 1 million Captagon pills were seized in the incident. Days earlier, on 16 May, Turkish maritime forces [intercepted](#) what they characterised as the largest narcotics shipment ever seized in Turkey, aboard a cargo ship that had departed from Syria’s Lattakia port en route for the United Arab Emirates. Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu [described](#) the shipment as containing 1.5 tonnes of hashish.

**Little pills, big bucks**

The illegal trade in hashish and Captagon has become a critical monetary pillar of the Assad regime and its network of militia supporters, effectively transforming Syria into a \$3.5 billion narco-state (see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State](#)). Although drugs produced in Syria are primarily destined for high-value Arab Gulf markets, transit nations in the wider

Middle East and Europe are wrapped up in the illicit trade, sometimes with violent results. Alongside other [smuggling](#) activities, drug running from Syria will increase the costs (and risks) inherent to border enforcement by Syria’s neighbours. In a worrying parallel, Lebanon’s own Captagon trade has also begun to flourish, and it is likely bound up in drug production, transport, and marketing in border areas inside Syria. In late April, Saudi Arabia [banned](#) imports of Lebanese fruit and vegetable produce, after discovering a large cache of Captagon pills inside a consignment of pomegranates that arrived via Lebanon. Such a ban targeting Syrian exports is not unthinkable, and it would be catastrophic for the country’s already atrophied economy. 🌐



## In Rare Move, Sanctioned Dutch Company Removed from U.S. Sanctions List


WASHINGTON

On 11 May, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [removed](#) the Netherlands-based company Staroil B.V. and two of its senior executives, Alexander Hollebrand and Paul Van Mazijk, from its list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN). The company was [sanctioned](#) on 17 December 2014 for having “materially assisted, sponsored, or provided

financial, material, or technological support for [...] the Government of Syria". The firm was **accused** of assisting the Syrian Government in purchasing oil products and facilitating deceptive transactions involving the sanctioned UAE-based Pangates International Corporation. In parallel, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) removed the sanctions designation from Syrian Brigadier General Jami Jami, the former head of Military Intelligence in Deir-ez-Zor, who was killed in the governorate in October 2013.

### No explanations, or no criteria?

The delisting of Staroil B.V. is particularly notable, given that the removal of U.S. and EU sanctions on entities linked to the Government of Syria has been exceedingly rare. That said, without clarifying the reason for the delisting, it is difficult to surmise what compliance actions the company took to get off the U.S.'s blacklist. On the contrary, this ambiguity is likely seen in Washington as a strategic asset, given the lack of a policy agenda for Syria that is either clearly articulated or realistically achievable. The removal of Jami Jami from the sanctions list, nearly eight years after his death, is a further indication of the sluggishness of the sanctions process as a whole. All told, delisting is sometimes held up as an important step demonstrating that sanctions can be converted from a punitive tool into an instrument of real leverage. To date, evidence of such outcomes in Syria — and indeed anywhere — is exceedingly thin. It bears noting that the firm in question is European; Syrian individuals and entities have yet to enjoy much success in formal appeals to remove themselves

from Western sanctions lists, further challenging the notion that sanctions can serve as proactive instruments in pursuit of a policy aim. 



## Abkhazia's Leader Meets al-Assad

DAMASCUS

On 16 May, [Syrian News Agency \(SANA\)](#) announced that Aslan Bzhania, the president of the disputed Republic of Abkhazia, arrived in Syria for talks to develop and strengthen existing cooperation between the two countries. According to [media](#) reports, the Abkhazian leader was met by the Government of Syria Minister of Transportation and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon his arrival at Damascus airport. Local media sources [indicated](#) that on 17 May, President Bashar al-Assad met with Bzhania to discuss political issues, economic cooperation, and Western states' positions on the current situation in Ukraine and Crimea.

### Syria and Abkhazia, brought together by isolation

The visit by the leader of Georgia's separatist Abkhazia region is among Syria's attempts to open relations with other international pariah states in a bid for a public relations boost. Regrettably for Damascus, the visit also reaffirms the image of Syria that was cultivated during the "[axis of evil](#)" days, suggesting it exists outside conventional law and international diplomatic recognition.

Syria officially recognized Abkhazia's independence in 2018, making it the fifth country to do so after Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru. In essence, the visit is an affirming gesture by one embattled leader claiming control over a frail, fragmented territory supported by Russia, to another. However, it also exposes the paucity of their respective political alliances, plunging them further into international isolation. 



## Quneitra Evacuation Grows as More Seek Exit from Syria's South

QUNEITRA


As of 20 May, local and media sources [indicated](#) that more than 120 people, including former fighters, women, and children, had queued for buses departing from Um Batna in Quneitra Governorate, to be resettled in northwestern Syria. According to local sources, this followed a long series of Russian-mediated negotiations between the Syrian Government's Security Committee and Quneitra notables to end military escalation and security tensions in Um Batna (see: [Syria Update 10 May 2021](#)). The parties reached an agreement for the voluntary evacuation of wanted persons to opposition-held territory in northwestern Syria, [conditional](#) upon the release of two detainees held by Government forces and the cessation of military escalation in Quneitra Governorate. As of writing,

The growth of the evacuation casts light on the Government of Syria’s continued approach to achieve stability by stifling dissent, eliminating threats, and making Syria “more homogenous”.

the evacuees had **reportedly not settled** in northwest Syria, due to friction with armed groups.

### Recapitulating reconciliation

The growing size of the Quneitra evacuation — from 10 wanted persons and their families as initially **demanding** by Damascus to more than 100 — constitutes a major escalation. The growth of the evacuation casts light on the Government of Syria’s continued approach to achieve stability by stifling dissent, eliminating threats, and making Syria “**more homogenous**”. The threat of military escalation as a wedge to drive wanted individuals into northern Syria echoes the reconciliation approach used widely throughout southern and central Syria through 2018, and sporadically since then, including in As-Sanamayn in early 2020 (see: [Syria Update 9 March 2020](#)). However, neither the threat of escalation nor the displacements that have followed have brought genuine reprieve from chronic instability in unstable communities. Worryingly, the Quneitra incident shows the continued utility of the Government forced reconciliation approach. Moreover, the growing number of people essentially volunteering to flee the south along with the forcibly displaced from Um Batna is likely an indication of a widespread desire to escape

the south by any means possible, particularly given the comparative stability of areas under Turkish influence in northern Syria. 




## 28 Percent Uptick in Displacements as March Sees 40,000 IDP Movements

### NORTHWEST SYRIA

**O**n 14 May, OCHA **reported** that there were approximately 40,000 IDP movements across Syria in March 2021, a 28 percent increase compared to February. As in preceding months, the majority of the movements took place in Syria’s northwest, and 94 percent of all displacements were registered in Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Dana subdistrict in northern rural Idlib received the largest number of newly displaced people, with about 3,400 movements, while Ma’arrat Tamasrin subdistrict in Idlib and Raju subdistrict in the northern Aleppo countryside each received about 3,000.

### Changing direction of displacement

The displacements were due to a number of factors: military activities, changes in areas of control, and, most notably, variable access to services and livelihoods. The findings can be read as an indicator of the way basic state functions and overall stability are becoming increasingly relevant to mobility. Pressures such as these were also apparent in the reported uptick in border crossings from Turkey into northwest Syria by Syrians who had been locked out of the Turkish labour market owing to COVID-related restrictions (see: [Syria Update 17 May 2021](#)). That being said, conflict-related violence (or its absence) remains relevant to population movements, including spontaneous return. For instance, the OCHA **reported** that approximately 23,000 IDPs returned to communities in Aleppo and Idlib governorates in March, twice the number recorded in February. This is likely a consequence of a protracted period of quiet on the frontlines of opposition factions and Government of Syria forces. Ehem and Ariha subdistricts in Idlib Governorate and Jebel Saman subdistrict in Aleppo Governorate received some 2,000, 1,500, and 1,300 voluntary IDP returns, respectively. Meanwhile, the largest return movement — 8,200 IDP returns to Khan Arnaba subdistrict in Quneitra Governorate — is indicative of another impediment to mobility monitoring: the challenges of data collection and counting. While such a large spike in returns would ordinarily suggest major changes to local conditions related to return, local sources have struggled to identify any such factor. They indicate that the returns were not a single large

wave, but a drawn-out process that occurred slowly, over time, and from many communities of displacement. While this finding leaves many important questions unanswered, it is further indication that such data should be interpreted with caution, particularly given the challenges of access and large-scale data collection in Syria. 



## >> 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.

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### **The National Defense Militia Supports a Renewable Energy Project in As-Salamiyeh**

**What Does it Say?** Amidst its growing influence As-Salamiyeh, the NDF has launched a renewable energy project to power a number of governmental buildings in the town.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The economic influence of quasi-governmental armed groups in Syria is a major factor in the permissions and access requirements that are part of aid project implementation in Syria. The greater their influence grows, the more likely aid activities are to create a conflict of interest with the groups.

**Source:** [Syria TV](#)

**Language:** [Arabic](#)

**Date:** [19 May 2021](#)

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### **Factbox: Iranian presence in Syria’s Deir ez-Zor province**

**What Does it Say?** The article maps Iranian forces in eastern Syria. It contends that following the defeat of IS in northeast Syria, Iran has started to consolidate its influence in this region. Controlling Abu Kamal district and the Iraqi border crossing are among its most important achievements in the region to date.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Iran has employed various tactics to expand its influence among local communities in Deir-ez-Zor, including religious, social, services, and financial support. This has at times put it at odds with Russia.

**Source:** [Atlantic Council](#)

**Language:** [English](#)

**Date:** [18 May 2021](#)

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### **Syria releases hundreds of social media critics ahead of election**

**What Does it Say?** The Government of Syria freed more than 400 civil servants, judges, lawyers and journalists detained this year in a crackdown on social media dissent under the cyber crimes law. Interestingly, the majority of these detainees have been pro-Government since the outbreak of the conflict.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The amnesty was widely seen as an attempt by the Government to cultivate public opinion ahead of the presidential election. It excluded tens of thousands of government opponents and political detainees held for years without trial.

**Source:** [Reuters](#)

**Language:** [English](#)

**Date:** [11 May 2021](#)

## >> Open Source Annex Continued

### **Rouhani Says Shalamcheh-Basra Railway to Connect Iran to Iraq, Syria, and the Mediterranean**

**What Does it Say?** Iranian President Hasan Rouhani has once again declared his country's intention to link Iran with Syria through Iraq via the Shalamcheh-Basra railway. The project, which would give Iran access to the Mediterranean, is meant to be part of a memorandum of understanding between Iran and China over the construction of highways and railways.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Gaining access to the Mediterranean is one of the main pillars of Iran's regional policy. This would be both an economic and strategic boon, as securing the bridge between Tehran and Beirut would link all countries that fall under Iran's influence. That said, such plans have been consistently floated since Iran entered the conflict, and to date, they have not amounted to more than ink on paper.

**Source:** [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)

**Language:** [English](#)

**Date:** [14 May 2021](#)

### **A U.S. Delegate Met with SDF Leadership in a First Foreign Visit**

**What Does it Say?** A delegation comprising the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy U.S. Envoy to Syria and the White House Director for Iraq and Syria at the National Security Council met with a number of SDF commanders and tribal figures in Ar-Raqqa on 18 May.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The delegation is meant to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to northeast Syria, including support for efforts to defeat IS, ensure long-term stability and access to humanitarian aid in the region, and support efforts to reach a political solution to the Syrian conflict. Nonetheless, no clear U.S. strategy for Syria under Biden has yet been articulated.

**Source:** [North Plus Network](#)

**Language:** [Arabic](#)

**Date:** [18 May 2021](#)

### **Erdogan: High-ranking PKK militant killed in Iraq operation**

**What Does it Say?** A high-ranking PKK Kurdish militant was killed in northern Iraq in an operation led by the Turkish intelligence forces. Sofi Nurettin has been involved in several attacks against Turkey and Turkish forces in Syria, according to the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Turkey has expanded its cross-border activities in Iraq as it targets PKK bases. These operations have been successful in undermining PKK operations in Iraq and Syria, and the Turkey-Iraq front is, on the whole, an overlooked factor in stability in northeast Syria.

**Source:** [Associated Press](#)

**Language:** [English](#)

**Date:** [17 May 2021](#)

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