

Syria Update

Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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Al-Assad 'Wins' Re-Election with 95.1% of The Vote. Now What?

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Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, vote in Duma. Image courtesy of Jesr Press.

> 0 n 28 May, Syria's parliamentary speaker, Hammouda Sabbagh, **declared** that Bashar al-Assad won 95.1 percent of the vote in the country's 26 May presidential election. Al-Assad's grip on the office was never seriously at stake in the election, despite the participation of two little-known challengers. The outcome delivers the embattled sitting president his fourth seven-year term and his second electoral "victory" since the onset of the popular uprising in 2011.

Analysts have strained to identify deeper meaning in the details of the election results. Some note that when compared with the 88.1 percent of votes al-Assad won in the 2014 election, the outcome may indicate that his grip on the instruments of government has tightened. Others observe that the outcome demonstrates an unremitting insistence on unity of national purpose as Damascus attempts to pivot toward a post-war footing. Some have seen in the results evidence that Russia is unwilling or incapable of reining in al-Assad and shaping Syrian Government policy. All of these observations have merit, yet there is a distinct risk in overinterpreting the election's results. Along with the dubious voter turnout figures peddled by Sabbagh, the results are better seen as a repudiation of the international community and the Assad regime's domestic antagonists than as an expression of democratic reality. Indeed, Sabbagh **claimed** that more than 14 million Syrians voted, despite the fact that the total population of all ages, including children, in Government of Syria areas is roughly 13.9 million,

according to data compiled by the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program. Meanwhile, overseas voter turnout reportedly ranged from marginal in neighbouring states to near-zero, particularly in Western countries where Syrian missions **were barred** from conducting elections.

As such the results strain credulity, and deliberately so. While al-Assad's victory changes nothing about the situation in Syria, the outcome is a stout rejoinder directed at the international community. UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen **cautioned** that the election falls outside the purview of internationally agreed **frameworks** supported by the UN. Western states including the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy, **denounced** the election as a sham. However, cruising to an overwhelming electoral "win" reasserts that al-Assad's control over the country is no longer seriously challenged from within. After a decade of violently suppressing popular uprising, al-Assad is secure from existential military threats and has no intention of relinquishing power through political means, despite internationally sponsored political processes to bring about credible democracy in the country. This defiant symbolism was apparent as al-Assad **cast his ballot** in the former opposition stronghold of Duma, a once heavily besieged area that was the last major opposition enclave near Damascus when it fell to Government forces in 2018. Using Duma as a set piece in the carefully orchestrated show of al-Assad's victory further demonstrates this triumphalist posture. Syrian state media have embraced the same view, publicly touting the congratulatory

messages of other international pariahs including the governments of **Belarus** and **Venezuela**. All told, the results underscore that political change is not on the agenda in Damascus and Syria's international standing in foreign capitals is unlikely to change soon.

Sham election

The election was conducted without transparency, independent monitoring, or even basic democratic safeguards — to say nothing of the pre-election disqualification of all but two challengers, neither one presenting a credible alternative to the 50-year reign of the Assad regime, which began under Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Government employees and university students were pressured to vote, impelled by threats of dismissal or expulsion if they refused to participate. State officials and security officers were also videotaped confiscating voters' IDs and forcing them to submit pre-marked ballots. As in past elections, the events furnished an opportunity for Syrians, whatever their true beliefs, to make a visible show of support for the ruling government; such **pressure to conform** has been analysed trenchantly in the academic work of Lisa Wedeen. Widely circulating video clips show soldiers marking ballots in favour of al-Assad not in ink, but in their own blood — an apparent sign of devotion. While **celebrations** also broke out in some Government-held areas during voting, there was at least some observable resistance to the process. Activists and notables in Dar'a Governorate publicly rejected the election, while the Russian-backed 5th Corps, which includes large numbers of reconciled former opposition fighters, refused to set up ballot boxes in Dar'a

city. In neighbouring As-Sweida Governorate, Damascus's concern over local resistance to the election drove the Syrian Government to dispatch a **high-level delegation** to meet with local leaders to secure their quiescence by promising greater services and support.

Voting did not take place in areas outside the Syrian Government's control, namely the northwest and northeast regions of the country. The President of the Syrian National Coalition, Nasr al-Hariri, sent a **message** to 75 countries and seven international organisations denouncing the elections as a "coup" against due political procedure. In the northeast, the Syrian Democratic Council **voiced** similar criticism in rejecting the process. Syrian civil society organisations were also quick to dismiss the process as illegitimate, and hundreds of demonstrators in the northwest took to the streets to protest the announced results. Meanwhile in Damascus and elsewhere supporters of al-Assad greeted the same news with celebratory gunfire.

In like a lion, out like a lamb?

The election trumpets the Assad regime's intransigence. Despite frequent assertions by analysts that Moscow in particular can apply reformist pressure on Damascus, Russia and Iran continue to support the Government of Syria as is. The election reaffirms that al-Assad has survived the war militarily and will be able to leverage that position to shape the terms of debate about the country's future, irrespective of Western claims to the contrary. Any future calculation by Western actors must acknowledge that for the foreseeable future, much of Syrian territory and a clear majority

of its population **will remain** under the control of a Government of Syria that is headed by Bashar al-Assad. How to mitigate the consequent risks this situation poses to the Syrian population as well as neighbouring nations should be a major focus of donor government thinking.

What can donors do?

Donor-funded aid work in the country must contend with al-Assad's personal staying power as well as the Syrian Government's intransigence. For political and pragmatic reasons, donor governments cannot and should not normalise relations with the Government of Syria under current conditions. That said, there are ways to improve humanitarian outcomes and advance strategic and political objectives while supporting much-needed aid work in Syria, even in Government-held areas. Among long overdue first steps is the need to escape conventional emergency response orthodoxies. Particularly if the political questions at the core of Syria's current impasse go unresolved in the long term, it will be fundamental for donors to provide more ambitious, sustained, and impactful aid to the Syrian population, who will suffer the consequences of the continuing protracted crisis.

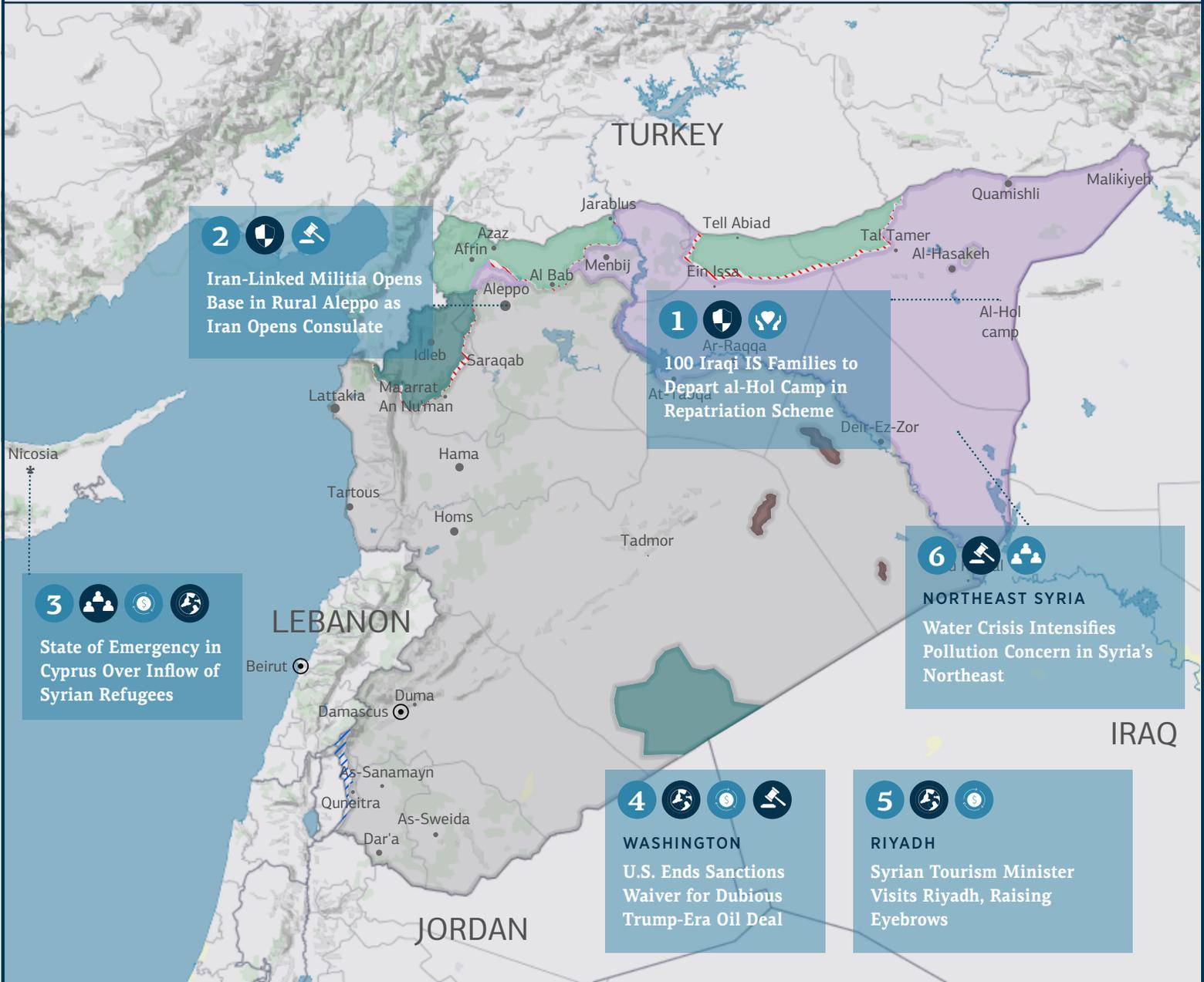
It is important for donors to retain the prepositioning and logistics capacity needed for a large-scale emergency response, particularly in northwest Syria, where major flash displacement is a persistent risk. However, more should be done to facilitate sustained response activities that provide long-term support. To date, such activities have generally been tabled. For instance, donors have

eschewed support for permanent shelters in the northwest, despite the preponderance of IDPs and camps, a lack of adequate shelter stock, and prohibitively high rents in urban areas. Myriad justifications for avoiding such support are offered, including fear of further aerial bombardment by Damascus and Moscow, Syrian Government takeover, and the risk of normalising Turkey's military incursions into the country. While such concerns are valid and must be taken into account, they ignore the reality that in lieu of more ambitious objectives, funding is concentrated in short-term projects and ineffective middle measures. This emphasis has exacerbated needs in corollary sectors, prompting a reliance on activities such as cash distributions, NFIs, and winterisation that do not address underlying issues — in this case, the lack of durable shelter. In addition to obvious questions of efficacy, there is a moral dimension to such activities. Beneficiaries who receive some kind of support, but not the kind that aid implementers, donors, and aid recipients themselves identify as most required, are prone to suffer cyclical hardships and needless indignity. A paradigm shift in the aid response is now urgently required. More robust and directed aid will not empower the Syrian Government, legitimise armed groups, or increase Turkish influence in northern Syria, if it is managed effectively and planned strategically. Such a shift will also be vital to bringing donor-funded relief works into greater alignment with the actual needs of the Syrian people, which are arguably as great now as at any time in the conflict. 

Syria Update

“ ... it is wrong to presume that women or children linked to IS by their family connections are themselves sympathetic to the group’s ideology. ”

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)



100 Iraqi IS Families to Depart al-Hol Camp in Repatriation Scheme

AL-HOL CAMP, AL-HASAKAH GOVERNORATE

On 25 May, local media sources **reported** that a convoy of buses arrived at the Al-Hol camp to transfer 100 Iraqi families, approximately 500 individuals in total, to Jad'ah camp in Iraq's Ninawa Province. The returnees are widely presumed to include the families of former members of Islamic State (IS). This repatriation event is **viewed** by U.S. officials as a potential first step to the return of thousands of other Iraqis from camps in northeast Syria and as a signal to third countries that they too should repatriate their stranded nationals who remain in the custody of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The self-fulfilling prophecy of al-Hol and radicalisation

This repatriation is reportedly the product of U.S.-Iraqi negotiations. U.S. officials have long pressured Iraqi leaders to facilitate the return of Iraqi nationals from al-Hol camp, yet authorities have consistently failed to follow through. As early as 2019, 1,700 Iraqi families at al-Hol **registered** with the UN for voluntary repatriation, but were stymied following resistance from local and provincial authorities in Iraq. Opposition has been particularly robust in areas such as

Mosul, where fragile communities with high levels of destruction **harbour** lingering fears of IS. For their part, would-be Iraqi returnees also fear retribution. This climate of retribution remains a sustained barrier to their return (see: [Syria Update 12 October 2020](#)). It is worth noting that so-called IS families include individuals, namely the wives and children of IS fighters, who were forcibly taken across the border into Syria. While some such individuals may harbour pro-IS sentiment, particularly given the squalid conditions and protection concerns in al-Hol (see: [Syria Update 8 March 2021](#)), it is wrong to presume that women or children linked to IS by their family connections are themselves sympathetic to the group's ideology. That said, the international community's inaction concerning al-Hol does increase the risk that vulnerable residents will have greater exposure to radical ideology over time.

The repatriation and reintegration of Iraqis on a large scale will remain a key issue in al-Hol, and it differs from the concerns of Syrian residents of the camp. Iraqis account for roughly half of the camp's population, which hovers around **60,000**. Since mid-2019, Iraqi officials have been **reportedly** pushing for the creation of a new detention camp aimed at isolating as many as 30,000 Iraqis who were captured in the last area of Syria liberated from IS. Humanitarian organisations have voiced concern over grouping repatriated IS-linked detainees in a single facility, which would impede their reintegration into Iraqi society and could expose them to greater risk of radicalisation. 



Iran-Linked Militia Opens Base in Rural Aleppo as Iran Opens Consulate

ALEPPO

On 24 May, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) **reported** that an Iranian-backed militia established a new base near Haboubah village in eastern Aleppo Governorate, opposite to SDF-controlled areas. SOHR indicated that in the past week the Iranian-backed militia has begun transferring arms and ammunition to the new base. This follows the opening of an Iranian consulate in Aleppo city on 22 May, with the purported aim of strengthening relations, economic ties, and cooperation between the countries.

Long-term influence, even as foreign fighters depart

The manoeuvres reflect two prongs of Iran's strategy to solidify its long-term influence in Syria and the wider region. Although there are no official details concerning the Iranian consulate's structure, activities, or the appointment of a consul, the mission is expected to coordinate all Iranian interests in Aleppo Governorate. The consulate may improve Iran's access to economic opportunities and business-to-business engagement in the community, which was Syria's economic dynamo in the pre-conflict period, but remains beset by high levels of destruction.

Elsewhere, charity and social projects have served as entry points for Iran into local communities, while promises of longer-term investment and reconstruction assistance have been used to anchor Tehran’s presence on the ground. The opening of a new Iranian base in eastern Aleppo Governorate reflects a second, evolving pillar of Iran’s Syria strategy. As Iran-backed foreign groups and Hezbollah have demobilised and left the country, Iran has leaned more heavily on local fighters. Although in Aleppo Governorate there is competition between Russia and Iran for influence, Iran’s weight is increasing, which carries the risk of clashes between their respective proxies, as seen in Deir-ez-Zor city earlier this month (see: [Syria Update 17 May 2021](#)). Further complicating matters, the new Iran-linked base is in the vicinity of numerous International Coalition military bases across the Euphrates River in SDF-controlled territory. These conditions increase the likelihood of run-ins with these forces too, which may take place with little or no warning. 🌐



State of Emergency in Cyprus Over Inflow of Syrian Refugees

NICOSIA

On 21 May, international media [reported](#) that authorities in Cyprus declared a state of emergency due to the increasing volume of

Syrian refugees arriving daily from Syria’s Tartous Governorate. On 20 May, Cypriot authorities intercepted a vessel off the island’s east coast carrying 97 Syrians. Cypriot Interior Minister Nicos Nouris described the “daily wave of migrant arrivals” as having overwhelmed reception centers. The nation also appealed for EU assistance, claiming the country lacks the capacity to host additional refugees. The proportion of total asylum seekers in [Cyprus has reached 4 percent of the island’s population](#), roughly four times the EU average. Since the start of the Syria crisis in 2011, more than 12,000 Syrians have sought refuge in the island nation of 900,000, and 8,500 have been granted protection there.

Anywhere but Syria

The arrivals are a notable departure from conventional refugee pathways. In the past, refugees fleeing Syria more commonly used routes leading from opposition-held areas in the north to Turkey and then on to Greece and elsewhere in Europe. Lacking land borders into states more favourable for asylum, the island of Cyprus has not received the major inflow of migrants previously seen in Turkey and Greece. However, Cyprus may grow in prominence as a transit country or destination for Syrians, especially given its proximity (roughly 100 km) to the Syrian coast, to say nothing of its proximity to Lebanon, which is also witnessing outward displacement. It is particularly notable that Syrians now arriving in Cyprus are reportedly fleeing Government-held Tartous, roughly 160 km to the east. Tartous has been spared much of the worst conflict-related violence that Syria has seen in the past decade, and it is still seen as

a stronghold of the Government. Their leaving Syria is evidence of the persistence of push factors, even in territory firmly held by the Government of Syria. Among other things, the displacements evidence the continuing relevance of protection concerns, while it is believed that deteriorating economic and living conditions are increasingly playing a role in decisions concerning mobility and displacement (see: [Syria Update 17 May 2021](#)). Worryingly, the displacements to Cyprus may be a harbinger of displacement pressures growing elsewhere in Syria too. 🌐



U.S. Ends Sanctions Waiver for Dubious Trump-Era Oil Deal

WASHIGNTON

On 17 May, Al-Monitor [reported](#) that the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has ended the sanctions waiver granted to the U.S. oil firm Delta Crescent Energy to develop oil refining capacity in SDF-held northeast Syria. According to the report, the waiver was withdrawn on 30 April, leaving the firm 30 days as a grace period to wind down its operations in Syria. The company reportedly denied that its waiver had been withdrawn or that its operations are in jeopardy. The waiver for the upstart energy company emerged in late summer 2020, pitched at the time as a measure to allow self-financing of the SDF (see: [Syria Update 17 August 2020](#)). To date,

little of substance has resulted from the project.

End of one era, beginning of another?

The reported end of the waiver period winds down a directionless Trump-era action without clarifying a U.S. policy to replace it. Proponents of the Autonomous Administration have cast the lapse of the waiver as a betrayal of the U.S.'s Kurdish partners, who were meant to be the chief beneficiaries of the enhanced technical and refining capacity introduced by Delta Crescent Energy. The timing is particularly notable given that tensions continue to flare in northeast Syria's oil-rich communities that nonetheless endure frequent fuel shortages. The end of the deal may challenge those tempted to see the U.S.'s policy as supporting overt regional autonomy for the Autonomous Administration. In the meantime, the U.S. is yet to articulate a coherent strategy for Syria. The non-renewal of the waiver does not define such a strategy, but it does indicate that Washington is unlikely to support deliberate efforts to prop up the region, despite the increase in stabilisation support there. As a result, the Autonomous Administration and SDF will likely be forced to finance themselves and meet their oil needs through greater cooperation with the Government of Syria. 🌐

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Syrian Tourism Minister Visits Riyadh, Raising Eyebrows

RIYADH

For the second time this month, reports of Syrian-Saudi rapprochement have come to the fore, this time concerning the prospective return of Saudi tourists to Syria. On 26-27 May, the Government of Syria Minister of Tourism Mohammad Martini attended the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Regional Commission for the Middle East events hosted in Riyadh. Reportedly invited by both UNWTO and the Ministry of Tourism of Saudi Arabia, Martini made the trip to Riyadh as the first official visit to the country from Syria since 2011.

Saudi keeps Syria at arm's length, for now

Martini's participation in the Riyadh conference may be significant in the long term, but it is far from the watershed moment in the normalisation of regional ties that the Syrian Government and its critics have thus far suggested. The two countries do have overlapping interests that encourage improved relations (see: [Syria Update 15 May 2021](#)). Yet, Syria's desperation for an economic lifeline from the Gulf is far greater than Saudi's tolerance for taking such a risk. In desperate need to break its isolation, the Syrian government's tone toward Saudi Arabia has changed markedly. Buthayna Sha'ban, a

political adviser to Bashar al-Assad, stated on 26 May that Martini's participation in the conference is a "positive step" and that more "efforts are being made" to improve relations between the two countries. To date, official Saudi comments on Syria remain unchanged, reconfirming a commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the roadmap it lays out. While Saudi Arabia's return to Syria in some capacity remains a near inevitability on a long enough time scale, it will proceed with caution, and slowly. Syria is under intense U.S. and European sanctions, and the risk of secondary sanctions under the Caesar Act will continue to temper Saudi's willingness to engage with Damascus on substantive matters for the foreseeable future. 🌐



Water Crisis Intensifies Pollution Concern in Syria's Northeast

NORTHEAST SYRIA

On 24 May, media sources reported that the levels of pollution in major waterways in northeast Syria are reaching a critical level, adding further cause for concern over the region's already strained water resources. The polluted waters are in many areas unsuitable for drinking, and dumping has compounded the challenge facing Syria's rivers as water levels drop to dangerous levels. Meanwhile, further concern surrounds the

depletion of groundwater, which is being used faster than it can be replenished, causing major problems for irrigation. Such issues have been compounded by low flow rates and water levels brought about by decreased rainfall and other issues including mismanagement, which has come to the fore this crop season with severe water shortages affecting the entire Euphrates River basin.

Troubled waters

Water shortages are an increasingly serious concern in northeast Syria. Pollution issues, including contamination, the spread of communicable disease, and the breakdown in water-dependent industries such as agriculture are issues of foremost concern for communities, aid implementers, and donors concerned with the region's stability. The increasing levels of pollution are a natural corollary to the dropping water levels in waterways throughout the region (see: [Syria Update 10 May 2021](#)). To make matters worse, all of these problems are interwoven with the current hydro-politics playing out between Turkey and northeast Syria, where claims abound that Turkey is securing its water needs by capitalising on its upstream position and leaving an insufficient supply for those who follow. Political issues are indeed relevant, as seen in the frequent water outages caused by Turkish-backed armed groups deliberately sabotaging Alok water station, which feeds Autonomous Administration areas. However, it is also true that urgently needed change cannot come from pressure on Turkey alone. Within the Autonomous Administration itself, more water-sensitive approaches must be adopted, particularly if the regional government is to live up to

its ecological pretenses. Less water-intensive crops should be promoted and supported through entire value chains. Inefficient irrigation systems should be repaired or replaced and more effective water distribution networks should be brought into service. 

>> 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.

The Dynamics of Underground Civil Society in Syria’s Regime-held Areas

What Does it Say? The useful piece notes the challenges impeding Syrian civil society entities, which have been driven “underground” in Government-held territories as general conditions have hampered their operations.

Reading Between the Lines: The piece’s recommendations are clear, actionable, and overdue. In addition to improving coordination and funding mechanisms between in-country and diaspora organisations, as recommended, donors should also look for ways to engage non-traditional civil society actors that do not fit cleanly into Western definitions of civil society.

Source: [Chatham House](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [May 2021](#)

Syria: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the Presidential Elections

What Does it Say? The statement expresses the EU’s non-recognition of the Syrian presidential election held on 26 May

Reading Between the Lines: Political non-recognition of the outcome of Syria’s presidential election is taken as a given. What the EU and other donors have yet to articulate is a realistic strategy for achieving more favourable outcomes in the country in the face of this political impasse.

Source: [European Union External Action Service](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [27 May 2021](#)

Obligatory Recruitment | Military Police Launched Wide-Scale Arrests in SDF-Held Areas

What Does it Say? The SDF are continuing their forced military recruitment of people born between 1990 and 2003.

Reading Between the Lines: Forced recruitment for a period of 12 months is deeply unpopular among residents of SDF territory and has sparked several protests over the last few months, adding to social tension in the areas of their control.

Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [28 May 2021](#)

>> Open Source Annex Continued

Syria Aid at Risk in Security Council Vote

What Does it Say? The piece lays out the stakes as the UN Security Council gears up to vote on the renewal of the cross border aid mechanism, which authorises deliveries to the last remaining entry point in opposition-held areas in Idlib.

Reading Between the Lines: the vote concerns life-saving aid delivery to millions of Syrians whose future under a cross-line delivery system pushed by Damascus and Russia is far from certain. Although the recent Atareb test convoy was intended to showcase how cross-line aid had changed for the better, in actuality it demonstrated that little had changed at all.

Source: [The New Humanitarian](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [26 May 2021](#)

EU Feminist Foreign Policy on Syria

What Does it Say? The paper offers new insights into how the EU's Syria policy could be approached from a feminist lens, given that the conflict has disproportionately affected women and marginalised groups, even as their potential capacity to aid in conflict resolution goes underutilised.

Reading Between the Lines: There is good evidence that women's participation in conflict resolution improves outcomes, which lends credence to another critical view that has taken root in recent years: overtly feminist foreign policy. Innovations such as these are needed now more than ever.

Source: [Friedrich Ebert Stiftung](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [May 2021](#)

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