

# Syria Update

28 June 2021 | Vol. 4 | No. 25

Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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## Bye, Bye Badia: IS Challenges SDF in Bid for Wider Relevance

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SDF affiliates in Deir-ez-Zor, a region that has witnessed intense IS reprisal. Image courtesy of 7al.net.

On 22 June, Islamic State (IS) media released a 38-minute audio statement recorded by the group's spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi. The recording was primarily intended to boost the spirits of IS affiliates in contexts as far-flung as Western and Central Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; although Syria was not the focus of Qurashi's statement, the recording did contain several important messages for the group's affiliates in the country. Among other things, Qurashi urged IS fighters to carry out attacks on Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) prisons in northeast Syria to "liberate" IS captives, and he urged them to target security personnel involved in the interrogation of IS members. While the message does not necessarily signal an upshift in the group's actions in Syria, it does come at a time when the SDF faces mounting popular resistance and the erosion of its social base (see: [Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring: April Update](#)).

The message's timing is notable. In early June, IS's religious police force, commonly known as Hesba, reportedly set up temporary checkpoints in the eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor. On at least one occasion, Hesba members stopped a taxi and demanded that its female passengers cease wearing make-up. They also threatened to burn all public transportation vehicles serving women who do not abide by a Sharia-compliant dress code.

The checkpoint incident does not signify that the group's feared religious police force has been

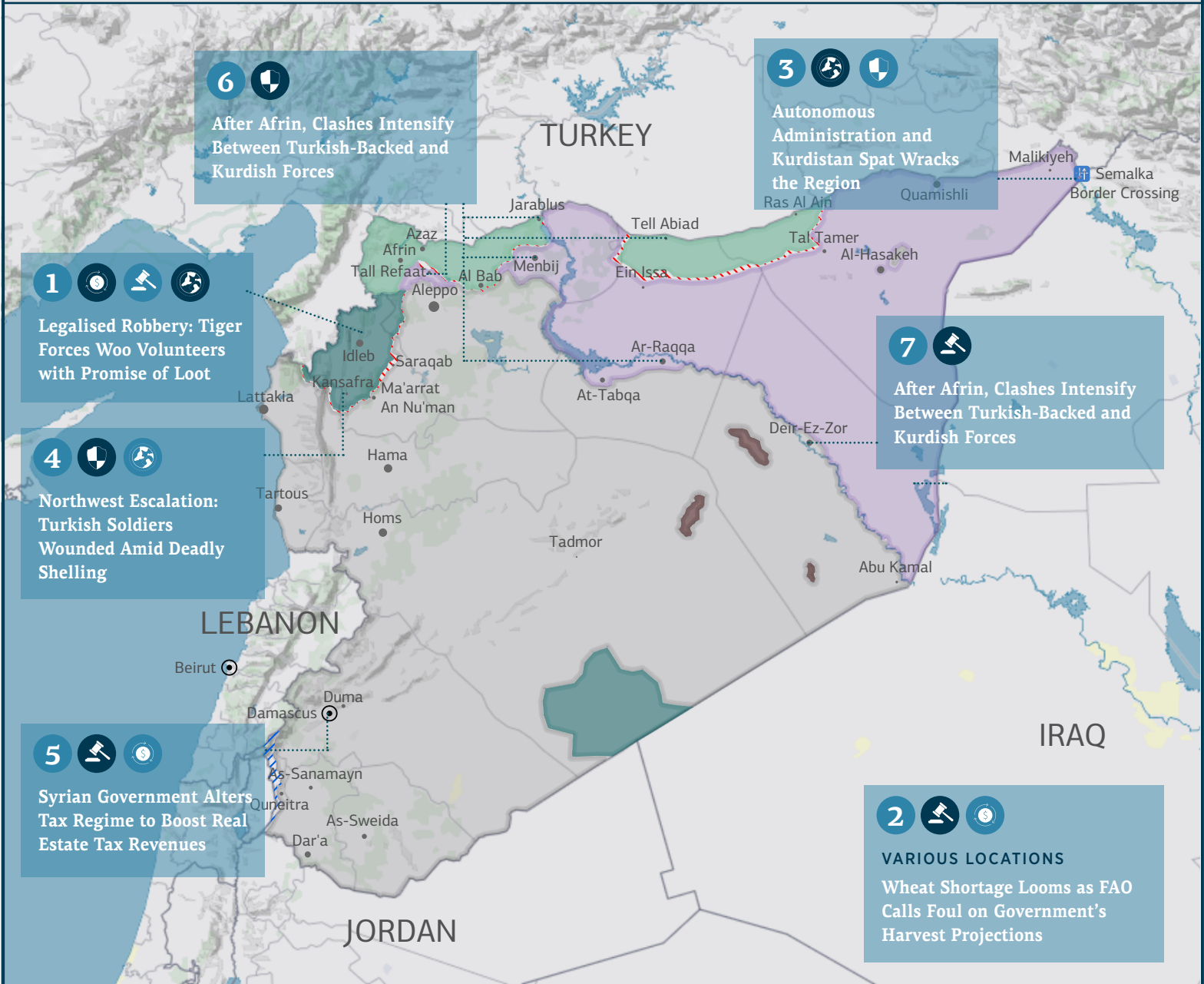
meaningfully reconstituted in eastern Syria, but it is an important signal to the group's followers and foes alike. The Hesba is a state structure, and its reappearance — albeit on a fleeting basis — demonstrates IS's eagerness to assert that its territorial ambition remains, even if no such entity can be sustained in eastern Syria at present. These events, concentrated in areas where the SDF's authority is weakest and its corruption most evident, are an inherent challenge to the Autonomous Administration. Coupled with IS's hit-and-run guerrilla warfare tactics, they contribute to the erosion of the Autonomous Administration's credibility.

Despite its limited scope, IS's capacity to establish temporary checkpoints, threaten locals, and impose its ideology is alarming. Incidents such as these will undermine counterterrorism efforts by the SDF and the US-led International Coalition. Whether the call for attacks targeting the SDF will result in the release of IS fighters or attract new recruits is unclear, but the rebuke of existing powers will leech support from the SDF. IS benefits from a distinct asymmetry: it does not have to re-establish a functioning state-like apparatus to achieve its recalibrated objectives; all it must do to succeed is undermine the Autonomous Administration. IS has a unique ability to capture the public imagination, and its task is made easier by the SDF's ineptitude in managing local dissent. 

# Syria Update

“ If the past is prologue, the Syrian Government’s efforts to buy crops from northeastern farmers are unlikely to succeed at-scale. ”

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)



## Legalised Robbery: Tiger Forces Woo Volunteers with Promise of Loot

IDLEB GOVERNORATE

On 17 June, media sources reported that the command of the 25th Special Mission Forces Division (known as the Tiger Forces, led by Brigadier General Suhail al-Hasan) issued a recruitment call for 500 fighters to join its forces on the Idleb front. The announced salary ceiling is 100,000 SYP (approx. 32 USD), but the contract allows recruited fighters to share around 10 percent of looted materials (e.g. copper) and a portion of the royalties obtained at the division's checkpoints on the M5 highway. Furthermore, fighters will be required to participate in agricultural activities in lands seized by the division in return for shares of the planted crops (e.g. pistachio, fig, and olive). According to another source, more than 370 people were recruited within five days of the announcement, mainly from Latakia, Tartous, and west rural Hama.


In parallel, on 23 June, Suleiman Shaheen, the commander of the Tiger Force's Shawaheen Regiment, published a Facebook post calling

...it demonstrates not only the Government of Syria's inability to curb crimes committed by its regular forces (such as the 4th Division and the Tiger Forces), but its tacit approval of such activities as a necessary source of income.

on Syrians to emigrate, warning that the "golden months are over." He added, "Russia has been granted control over Syria's resources for the next 50 years as compensation for its participation in the war." The post was titled "a dose of depression," and has been widely circulated among Syrians.

### On all levels, the war economy is being legalised

War economy activities including looting, crossing fees, and property confiscation have been commonplace among armed groups throughout the conflict in Syria, but the explicit reference to illicit activities as a recruitment incentive is especially notable. In this case, it demonstrates not only the Government of Syria's inability to curb crimes committed by its regular forces (such as the 4th Division and the Tiger Forces), but its tacit approval of such activities as a necessary source of income. Shaheen's post refers to another aspect of the war economy, namely Russia's domination over vital economic sectors such as natural resources, power, and ports through contracts granted by the Government of Syria in compensation for its support in the war. While being directly involved in one type of war economy activities, Shaheen harshly criticises other manifestations, namely clientelism, corruption, and the capture of state resources by a foreign power. The further normalisation of war economy

activities will undermine future efforts to rein in all such abuses, including pushes for transitional justice and the restoration of national sovereignty over resources. 



## Wheat Shortage Looms as FAO Calls Foul on Government's Harvest Projections

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

On 21 June, media sources reported that, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Government of Syria's target of domestically producing 1.2 million tonnes of wheat is now highly unrealistic. FAO has estimated that as a result of the shortfall, Syria will need to import at least 1.5 million tonnes of wheat in order to meet demand. Meanwhile, local sources also indicate that the wheat supply is in jeopardy in the areas under the Autonomous Administration's control. They cite estimates that some producers will see yields as small as one-fourth of last year's harvest, while the Autonomous Administration's agriculture chief has reportedly stated that the region's overall wheat output will likely dip to 500,000 tonnes, down from 850,000 tonnes last year, due to low rainfall. The confluence of low rainfall and conflict has resulted in 12.4 million people in Syria becoming food insecure,

## If the past is prologue, the Syrian Government’s efforts to buy crops from northeastern farmers are unlikely to succeed at-scale.

and a further 1.3 million becoming severely food insecure, meaning that they are unable to survive without food assistance.

### A starving state

As harvest approaches, Syria is entering an especially critical period to establish a sustainable wheat balance. If crop yields fall short of ambitious targets, as now projected, the country will be set on a worrying course, and each of the main regions involved in the annual wheat wars — Government-held areas and the Autonomous Administration — will face a different problem set. The Government of Syria will be required to resort to costly, unreliable imports, likely via Russia. If the past is prologue, the Syrian Government’s efforts to buy crops from northeastern farmers are unlikely to succeed at-scale. On 14 June, the Autonomous Administration **banned** the sale of wheat, cotton, and other locally produced agricultural goods to other authorities, as it has done in previous crop seasons (see: [Syria Update 8 June 2020](#)). According to [Syria Report](#), the Government of Syria’s bid to buy wheat from farmers is set at 900,000 SYP per tonne, up from 550,000 SYP last year. Although the Autonomous Administration has not yet set a wheat price, it is believed that it can outbid the Government, and it also is reported to have wheat stores on hand to make up for some shortfalls. With this cushion on hand, the Autonomous Administration may

therefore find that the greatest risk ahead concerns local acceptance, which will take a hit if it underbids the Government but insists upon halting cross-line wheat sales, thus forcing farmers to sell to it at unfavourable rates. In such a case, its restrictions will exacerbate widespread frustration over poor service provision, water scarcity, and IS resurgence. 🌱



## Autonomous Administration and Kurdistan Spat Wracks the Region

### SEMALKA BORDER CROSSING

On 20 June, media sources **reported** that the Autonomous Administration’s Information Department shut down Kurdistan 24’s local news bureaus within areas under its control and revoked its license, accusing it of “spreading hate speech and agitating local people.” Two days later, the Autonomous Administration **announced** the closure of Semalka-Fishkhabour Border Crossing, the main border crossing linking northeast Syria with the Kurdistan region in Iraq, citing “technical matters.” Humanitarian organisations and aid workers were exempted. However, according to


media sources, the decision was retracted by the Semalka Crossing Administration a few hours later.

It is worth noting that these two incidents came after a series of events that manifested the recent deterioration of the relationship between the Autonomous Administration and the Kurdistan Regional Government. On 10 June, Huler Jihad, the representative of the Autonomous Administration in Iraqi Kurdistan, was **detained** by the Kurdistan security forces in Erbil along with two members of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Moreover, on 22 June, the Semalka Crossing Administration **condemned** the Fishkhabour Crossing Administration and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the ruling party in the Kurdistan region, for mistreating Syrians, including the wounded and the sick, entering the region.

### Regional calculations override ethnic unity

De facto Kurdish control over northeast Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan has thus far failed to produce political, **territorial**, or even economic unity, but has rather fuelled intra-Kurdish disputes and hardened borders even further. Any opportunity for unification has been thwarted by **intra-Kurdish rivalries**, which have spiked in conjunction with the deterioration in the relationship between the KDP and the PYD. This multifaceted rivalry is shaped by history and current regional conflict dynamics. A driving factor is the relationship with Turkey, particularly as it relates to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), of which the PYD is a Syrian affiliate. Also apparent are conflicting visions of northeast Syria’s political future. These vacillate between the push for

federalism advocated by the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and its Iraqi affiliate, the KDP, on one side, and the dream of independence pursued by the PKK and some hardliners within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the PYD on the other.

The same points of contention have hindered all [previous attempts](#) at unification that aimed to implement a power-sharing framework and to break the PYD's monopoly on political and military power in northeast Syria (see: [Syria Update 28 September 2020](#)). The continued failure of Kurdish political parties such as the PYD, KNC, and KDP to put aside their disputes will endanger any remaining hope for a Kurdish unified front. It also poses an existential threat to the predominantly Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria, especially in light of external threats posed by the Government of Syria, Russia, and Turkey, as well as internal threats such as IS insurgency, economic deterioration and outrage among Arab communities in northeast Syria. 



## Northwest Escalation: Turkish Soldiers Wounded Amid Deadly Shelling

KANSAFRA, IDLEB GOVERNORATE

**O**n 23 June, [media sources](#) reported that two Turkish

soldiers were wounded by artillery shelling by Government of Syria forces on the village of Kansafra in the Jabal al-Zawiya region of southern Idleb. Turkish forces based in nearby observation points have reportedly responded to the attack. [Media sources](#) also reported that Syrian Government forces targeted a Turkish observation point in Atareb, west of Aleppo, with an anti-tank missile, killing a woman and wounding two children.

The incidents followed stepped-up attacks elsewhere in northwest Syria. On 21 June, [media sources](#) reported that seven people were killed in an attack by Government of Syria forces on a police station in Ahsam in Jabal al-Zawiya. The casualties include two civilians, a policeman, and four members of opposition factions. Meanwhile, two women were killed in an attack on al-Barah; the number of fatalities is expected to rise as 13 others were injured, some of whom are in critical condition. Following the incident, on 22 June, Government of Syria forces launched a wave of intensive bombardment against various opposition-held towns in Idleb, Latakia, and Hama governorates, though no casualties were reported. Opposition factions responded with rockets targeting Government of Syria positions in Ma'rat Mokhis in southern Idleb.

More importantly, the attacks also coincide with the run-up to the renewal vote on the UN cross-border authorisation, which is due to lapse on 10 July, unless Russia and its Western counterparts reach an accommodation.

## Temporary escalation as a bargaining chip in negotiations

The deliberate targeting of Turkish positions and the wounding of Turkish soldiers are rare and notable developments in northwest Syria. Although Turkish soldiers have been killed in Syria in the past, explicit targeting by the Government of Syria increases the likelihood of intense direct confrontation between the parties (see: [Syria Update 27 June - 3 July 2019](#)). Russia has reason to seek a downshift in tensions — or at the very least to prevent all-out confrontations of the kind that now appears possible. Not only has Turkey's military proven to be a formidable presence in Idleb, but if Turkey is seriously challenged, it would likely be driven closer to the US, which would ultimately be detrimental to Russian interests in Syria.

The other attacks by the Syrian Government in Idleb are also notable. They come after months of calm, as violence has gradually increased following Syria's presidential elections in May. Other factors are also relevant. The escalation has coincided with a summit between the presidents of Russia and the US. More importantly, the attacks also coincide with the run-up to the renewal vote on the UN cross-border authorisation, which is due to

lapse on 10 July, unless Russia and its Western counterparts reach an accommodation. Some analysts have attributed the latest escalation to an attempt by Russia to pressure the US, EU, and Turkey over the mechanism, including the possibility of promoting the cross-line alternative that Russia has advocated. While attacks such as these always have the potential to trigger more significant responses, they are likely intended in large part as leverage in ongoing negotiations. 🌐



## Syrian Government Alters Tax Regime to Boost Real Estate Tax Revenues

DAMASCUS

On 22 June, [media sources](#) reported that Syrian Ministry of Finance issued a decision that will bring into effect a 1 percent tax on properties even when sales are canceled. The decision expands the tax burden for real estate sales, in implementation of [Law No. 15](#) issued by President Bashar al-Assad at the end of March 2021, which imposed a tax of 1 percent of property value. The new decision has been widely criticised by former officials, lawyers, and jurists, who have emphasised that it contradicts the text of Law No. 15, which states that “in the event of a ruling to dismiss or cancel the case, the court shall decide to refund the amounts paid in accordance with the provisions of Clause No. 1 of this paragraph to the person who paid.”

### New revenue streams

The law is an example of the state’s widening reach as officials seek additional revenue streams. As economic growth and reconstruction remain distant prospects, revenues are increasingly coming from innovations in tax law and fee-based governance. Following public controversy over the decision, the Ministry of Finance stated on its official Facebook account the sales process is considered complete — and a taxable event — after approvals are given, even if the sale is subsequently voided. The Ministry [justified](#) the decision on the grounds that some real estate agents cancel sales on paper to avoid paying real estate sales tax and registration fees. The decision has sparked widespread controversy in Syria and was denounced as unfair and unjustified. 🌐



## After Afrin, Clashes Intensify Between Turkish-Backed and Kurdish Forces

TAL ABYAD, AR-RAQQA, MENBIJ, TALL REFAAT, JARABLUS

On 22 June, [media sources](#) reported that one civilian was wounded and significant structural damage was sustained in the second consecutive day of rocket fire from Turkish-backed forces in Tal Abyad, and northern Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On the same day, Turkish-backed forces and the SDF exchanged rocket fire and shelling around SDF-controlled [Menbij](#); the clashes were

reportedly the most [intense](#) between the two parties in several months. Following the exchange, Turkish-backed armed groups shelled villages along the Sajur River, a tributary of the Euphrates that cuts through the Menbij plain, damaging civilian property and agricultural land. In response, the SDF targeted Turkish military assets in Jarablus, [reportedly](#) causing significant damage to a Turkish military base.

### Blood in the water

The altercations are part of the long-running conflict between Turkish-backed groups and the SDF. It is not immediately clear what triggered these exchanges, but they follow the deadly hospital attack in Afrin, which has stoked tensions between Turkey’s Syrian proxies and Kurdish forces (see: [Syria Update 21 June 2021](#)). After that incident, Nasr al-Hariri, the foremost public leader of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, [called](#) on Turkey to intervene to expel Kurdish forces from Menbij and Tall Rifaat. Other factions within the opposition rebuked Hariri’s statement, claiming it represented only his personal opinion. The SDF [condemned](#) Hariri, claiming that Turkish intervention violates Syria’s sovereignty and that Hariri’s statements only serve to undermine the legitimacy of the opposition. Discord between the Turkey-based opposition and the SDF is deep-seated. That said, the Autonomous Administration is uniquely vulnerable to destabilisation instigated or nurtured by Turkey. Turkey’s job is made easier in areas like Menbij by the SDF’s unpopular policies, including increasingly strict curfews and mobility restrictions, forced conscription, and the arrests of civilians. 🌐



## Former Al-Nusra Member Appointed Head Of Al-Futuwwa Football Club

DEIR-EZ-ZOR

On 23 June, [media sources](#) reported that the Government of Syria Sports Association Executive Office selected Madlool Omar al-Aziz as the new head of the al-Futuwwah football club. The club represents the city of Deir-Ez-Zor in Government-controlled areas. Aziz is a member of the Syrian People's Assembly; he is also **a former member of the Al-Nusra Front**, a precursor to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and a former affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Surprisingly, he joined the Syrian parliament in 2020 despite having earned the moniker "Slaughterer" (lit. "Abu Dabbeh") for his brutality when fighting Government forces. According to Deir-ez-Zor 24, Aziz holds an important role in the local affairs of the **Qaterji company**, a Government of Syria-affiliated firm that mostly deals in oil and wheat, and is sanctioned by the West. Aziz reportedly facilitates much of the smuggling between the Government of Syria and Autonomous Administration territories.

### Possession Play

This is not the first time that the Government of Syria has sought to integrate former opposition members or extremists into state or quasi-state functions, likely in an attempt to reduce tensions,

bolster its ranks, or make use of an individual's skills and connections. Aziz's ascension to the Syrian parliament is a more substantial victory in terms of rehabilitation in the eyes of Damascus, but his role in the football system is a marker of social prominence in the tense environment of Deir-ez-Zor. **Similarly**, Omar al-Rifai joined the Syrian Government when it seized Dar'a in 2018 after having been a prominent IS leader. He was killed in 2020 during the clashes in Idlib while fighting on the side of Government forces. Aziz's al-Futuwwah club appointment is not the first and almost certainly not the last time Damascus will be seen seeking to instrumentalise its erstwhile foes in an effort to reassert itself in a restive area. 



## >> 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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### **Imprisoned By Texts: When Will the Implementation Begin?**

**What Does it Say?** The article contends that Administrative decentralisation through Law 107 could be a key elements of a political solution in Syria if it were implemented.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Such thinking has been common throughout the latter stages of the conflict. It is hard to imagine Damascus relinquishing authority in areas it has fought so hard to control; any accommodation within a decentralised Syria is likely to force rival actors to surrender power, not Damascus.

**Source:** [Al Akhbar](#)

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

**Date:** [23 June 2021](#)

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### **HTS is not al-Qaeda, But it is Still an Authoritarian Regime to be Reckoned with**

**What Does it Say?** The piece argues that despite al-Jolani’s pivot to transform HTS from a global jihadist group into one with a strictly Syrian focus, his retention of power continues to be a key driver of local grievances in Idlib and Ankara.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The “softening” of HTS remains the key feature of its campaign to curry international acceptance and present itself as “the least bad option.”

**Source:** [Middle East Institute](#)

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

**Date:** [24 June 2021](#)

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### **‘We Thought We Would Return:’ 10 Years on, Syrian Refugees Dream of Home - Photo Essay**

**What Does it Say?** These photos show the reality of some of the 850,000 registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, of whom over 750,000 live in extreme poverty.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Although the situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is already dire, conditions will only worsen given the accelerating deterioration of the Lebanese economy.

**Source:** [The Guardian](#)

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

**Date:** [23 June 2021](#)

## >> Open Source Annex Continued

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### Syria's Tycoons Getting Richer a Year after Caesar Act Enaction

**What Does it Say?** Although the Caesar Act was enacted to strangle the Syrian regime, its efficacy is doubtful given that Government-associated Syrian oligarchs have only increased their wealth.

**Reading Between the Lines:** A large portion of the ruling class generates revenue from sectors unaffected by sanctions or through heightened control over the few activities that carry on despite international censure. Syria should be seen as a demonstration of the inefficacy of sanctions enacted without the coordination of a deliberate, purposeful policy agenda that is also achievable.

**Source:** [Enab Baladi](#)

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

**Date:** [21 June 2021](#)

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### Living in Damascus After a Decade of War: Work, Income, and Consumption

**What Does it Say?** According to a survey of 600 Damascenes in three neighbourhoods, the average weekly work hours in Damascus is one of the highest in the world, and even though nearly half of the respondents described their income level as average, a large

segment of them declared their spending was below the global poverty line.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Acquiring such data from Government-held areas is difficult; a dataset like this is a rare window onto unvarnished realities inside Syria. It is unsustainable and a cause for concern that such a large percentage of Damascenes rely on external sources of income to support themselves. Reportedly, 25 percent rely on remittances from abroad, while 41 percent rely on cash assistance from relief organisations.

**Source:** [Operations and Policy Center](#)

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

**Date:** [22 June 2021](#)

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### Yedieth Ahronoth: Assad Trying to Appease Tel Aviv for Months

**What Does it Say?** The report suggests that Al-Assad has repeatedly tried to communicate with Israel over the past six months.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The Syrian opposition frequently alludes to such a possibility, but concrete outcomes have never materialised. More often than not, such reports rely on a reflexive mistrust of Israel to tar al-Assad.

**Source:** [The Syrian Observer](#)

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

**Date:** [22 June 2021](#)

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### Determinants of Forced Displacement in the Syrian Conflict: An Empirical Study

**What Does it Say?** The paper seeks to understand the scale of displacement, its distribution, and its driving factors, and argues that exclusionary institutions that use violence and terror as a tool for dominance and violate private and public rights are the main drivers of displacement. The destruction of social capital through the dismantling of social networks, the absence of national consensus, and the deterioration of trust and common values also contribute to displacement, as do economic and living conditions and the availability of education opportunities.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Displacement remains one of the preeminent challenges of the Syria crisis, as no end is in sight for IDPs and refugees who are stuck in limbo as the protracted conflict drags on.

**Source:** [The Syrian Center for Policy Research](#)

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

**Date:** [March 2021](#)

**The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR).** WPCS will provide operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a mid-conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers who will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

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