

# Syria Update

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## Dar'a Siege: Russia Abouts Face, Amps up Pressure

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Protesters gather in the square near Omari Mosque in Dar'a al-Balad amid besiegement by Russia and the Government of Syria. Image courtesy of Horan Free League.

**> S**ince 24 June, Dar'a al-Balad has been under siege by Government of Syria and Russian forces, which have blocked the entry of food and other basic necessities and intermittently shut off electricity and water. Main roads linking Dar'a al-Balad, the half of Dar'a city that remains under the partial control of reconciled opposition figures, from other parts of the city and to outlying areas have been cut. Local sources indicate that the siege forces have demanded the handover of 200 light weapons, which the Dar'a Central Committee has thus far refused. While the refusal to surrender personal firearms — described by Dar'a locals as a “red line” — is seen as the trigger of the siege, its deeper, underlying cause is understood to be Dar'a's continued insistence on semi-autonomy, epitomised by the area's refusal to participate in Syria's presidential election in May (see: [Syria Update 31 May 2021](#)). The siege is the most significant fallout to date over the civil disobedience shown in some corners of Syria as al-Assad cruised to re-election. The developments are also a revealing demonstration of Russia's newfound willingness to deploy violence to bring a restive area to heel, a worrying course reversal after Moscow has spent two years seeking inroads in the community through direct military-to-military integration of former opposition fighters.

### All sticks, no carrots

Leading the siege is the recently appointed commander of Russian forces in southern Syria, General Asad Allah. Allah has orchestrated a step change in Russia's approach to pacifying the chronically unstable southern Syria community. Russian warplanes have reportedly circled

Dar'a, and Allah has intensified pressure by threatening to deploy Shiite militias to force the community to capitulate to Moscow's demands. Already, the Iran-backed Radwan Brigade has mobilised and entered the nearby city of Izra' with heavy machine guns and 4x4 vehicles. The besiegement is an act of retribution after the region blocked election proceedings; in defiance of the Government of Syria, major demonstrations took place in the community and elsewhere in the south, and protesters provoked Damascus by flying the Syrian revolutionary flag. The ongoing siege is therefore a response to the overt challenge to Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy. It is calibrated to make an example of Dar'a, where reconciled opposition fighters retain a surprising degree of autonomy, which has enabled them to refuse to accommodate Government of Syria control.

Beyond the electoral context, the siege may be evidence of a paradigm shift in Moscow's southern Syria strategy. Heretofore, Russia has played a relatively conciliatory role in the south. Russian military commanders have been important intermediaries in the region since Russian forces captured several regions of southern Syria in a parallel military campaign alongside the Government of Syria in summer 2018 (see: [Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate](#)). In contrast with the Government of Syria's reconciliation strategy, which relied on deals brokered through local notables and traditional elites, Russia's approach was built to a large extent on military connections, leading to reconciliation terms that allowed many opposition fighters to be

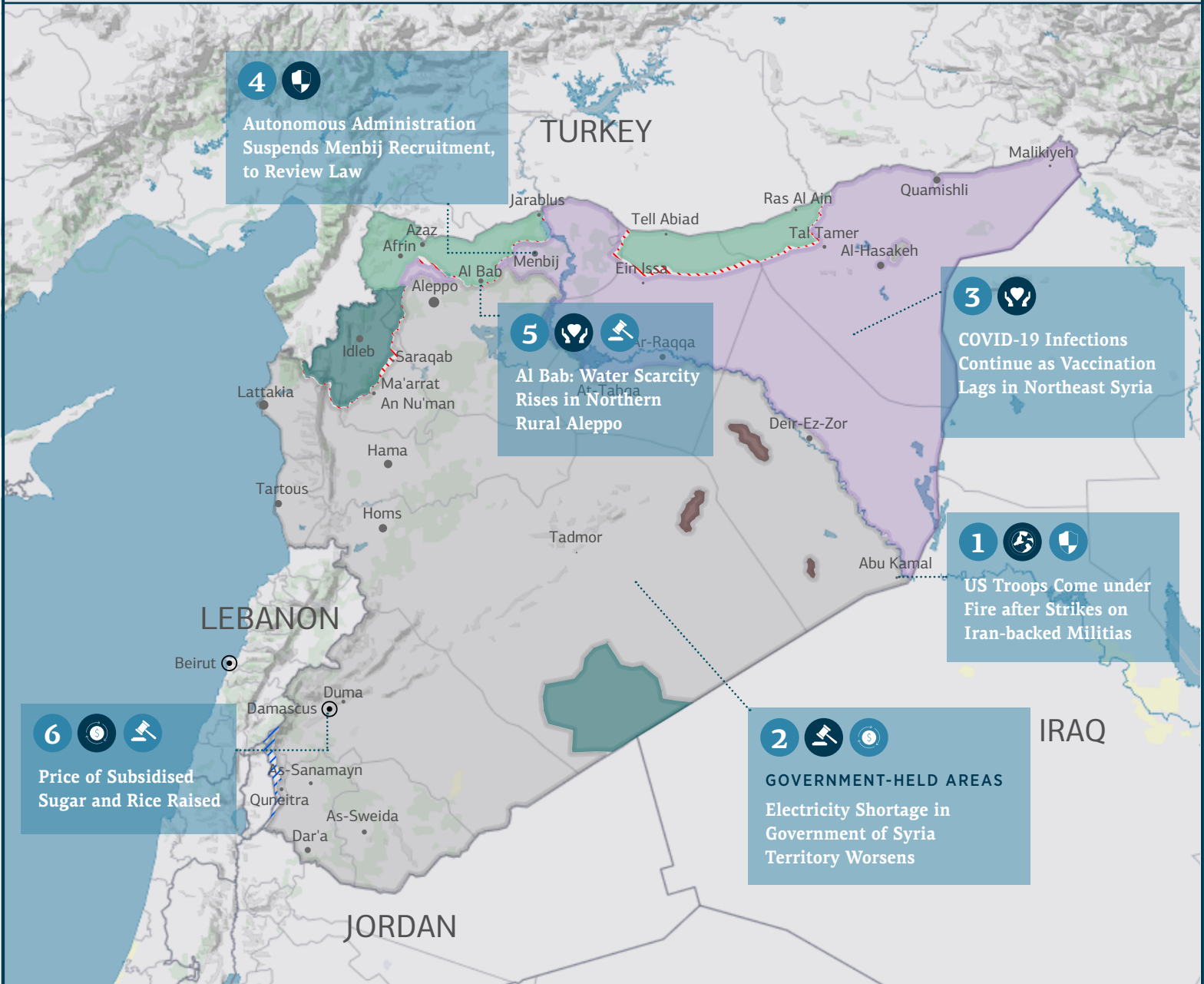
integrated into Russian-controlled military entities, namely the 5th Corps. Whereas Government of Syria reconciliations were often highly retributive, leading to major displacement, Russia's reconciliation strategy in the south allowed many opposition fighters to remain in place. Moscow vowed to restore services and free detainees, while its military command aimed to integrate, and thereby control, former opposition fighters, in hopes that neutralising the threat of overt military resistance to Damascus would lead to greater stability in reconciled areas (see: [Intermediaries of Return](#)).

That basic strategy is called into question by the Dar'a siege. While reconciliations in southern Syria began to falter within months of their signing, recent developments may evidence a different approach. To date, Russia's presence in the south has been accepted as an alternative to Iran. Although the Russian-Iranian rivalry in Syria is often overblown, the two powers do have competing agendas, especially in southern Syria. Now, Allah's mobilisation of an Iran-backed militia in Dar'a shows that Russia may be willing to cooperate with Iran on a goal they seemingly share: pacifying the remnants of the predominantly Sunni opposition in Dar'a. Since 2018, donors and aid implementers have frequently speculated over Russia's ability to take concrete steps to stabilise the south. If recent events are any indication, Russia may be running out of patience, as its attempts to build inroads in the south have failed to produce the stability desired. Although Dar'a is a special case, the siege there is a likely indication that Russia will countenance a more aggressive approach elsewhere too. 

# Syria Update

“ If militia groups inflict US casualties in future attacks, or if they continue to employ advanced technologies such as UAVs, it will be taken as a provocation and grounds for the US to carry out more widespread strikes and escalate the ongoing shadow war with Iran in Iraq and Syria. ”

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)





## US Troops Come under Fire after Strikes on Iran-backed Militias

ABU KAMAL, SYRIA-IRAQ BORDER

On 28 June, the US carried out what US officials described as “defensive precision airstrikes” targeting Iran-backed militia groups in the Iraq-Syria border region, near Abu Kamal. According to a Pentagon statement, the targeted facilities had been used by militias that are engaged in unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks against US personnel and facilities in Iraq. The strikes targeted operational and weapons storage facilities at two locations in Syria and one location in Iraq. Several Iran-backed militias used these facilities, including Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada. The US did not publish information regarding casualties from the attack; the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported “at least five Iran-backed Iraqi militia fighters” were killed and others were wounded in the strikes in Syria. In apparent retaliation for the US airstrikes, Iran-backed militiamen fired artillery rounds at US troops in Syria in the vicinity of al-Omar oil field, which is controlled by the US-backed SDF. No casualties were reported. The Government of Syria denounced the strikes as a “flagrant violation of the sanctity of Syrian and Iraqi lands.”

### US-Iran shadow war

This is the second time US President Joe Biden has ordered strikes

against Iran-backed militias since taking office in January; the first was in February, when the US targeted similar facilities in Syria in response to rocket attacks on US and coalition personnel in Iraq. While direct confrontations between US troops and Iranian proxies are common in Iraq, they have been relatively rare in Syria. However, the attacks highlight how the Biden administration will struggle to compartmentalise its regional approach to Iranian clients in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere — a challenge compounded by the priority assigned to attempts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran. Despite their relatively small scale, the airstrikes risk tit-for-tat escalation (see: Syria Update 18 December 2019 - 6 January 2020). If militia groups inflict US casualties in future attacks, or if they continue to employ advanced technologies such as UAVs, it will be taken as a provocation and grounds for the US to carry out more widespread strikes and escalate the ongoing shadow war with Iran in Iraq and Syria. ❄️



## Electricity Shortage in Government of Syria Territory Worsens

GOVERNMENT-HELD AREAS

On 29 June, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that amid a heatwave in Syria, electricity

rationing has tightened, with Government-controlled areas receiving as little as two hours of electricity per day. In some areas the power outages last up to 48 hours. Popular discontent is reportedly growing due to the electricity situation as well as the continuing shortage of fuel and other basic necessities. The Government of Syria’s Minister of Electricity, Ghassan al-Zamil, attributed the increased rationing to gas and fuel shortages, which Damascus blames on international sanctions. He stated that rehabilitation of power plants is underway to reduce rationing hours.

### Running on fumes

Syria’s power generation issues coincide with increased summertime demand and recurrent fuel importation challenges. International sanctions and pressure on Iran to halt oil export to Syria are factors in the shortages that are now hampering electricity generation and other oil-dependent sectors such as public transit (see: Syria Update 12 June 2021), but a bottleneck in domestic refining capacity is also relevant to the country’s fuel production sector. Meanwhile, local sources indicate that the Syrian Government is facing difficulty procuring the parts needed to carry out maintenance and rehabilitation of power plants. Additionally, as Lebanon faces an acute fuel crisis, authorities continue to crack down on cross-border fuel smuggling, an important (but easily exaggerated) lifeline keeping Syrian fuel tanks full. Knock-on effects of the electricity crisis are setting in. Local sources indicate that electricity cuts are affecting water provision, while the country’s continuing public transit squeeze will affect overall mobility and transport-reliant sectors of the economy. ❄️



## COVID-19 Infections Continue as Vaccination Lags in Northeast Syria

### NORTHEAST SYRIA

On 24 June, Jowan Mustafa, the co-chairman of the Autonomous Administration Health Authority, **stated** that only 7,000 people have been vaccinated so far in northeast Syria, primarily healthcare workers, those above 55 years old, and people with chronic illnesses. He added that the Autonomous Administration has received only 23,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine so far from the

World Health Organisation (WHO), which can cover approximately 11,500 people. In parallel, media sources **reported** that only 205 people have received the vaccine in al-Hol Camp, where approximately 60,000 people live in squalid conditions and tight quarters. **Reportedly**, the vaccinations in the camp bypassed sections of foreign women. In addition to such issues, the Autonomous Administration’s Health Authority has cited the worrying spread of **misleading information** about the vaccine in northeast Syria, which it claims has blunted popular willingness to get vaccinated and hinders vaccination plans. The Health Authority **announced** that only 302 people came to its centres to receive the vaccine in Al-Malikeyyeh despite the authority having a plan to vaccinate around 1,000 people. As of 1 July, around 18,510 confirmed cases and

762 COVID-related deaths have been **reported** in northeast Syria.

### A supply and demand challenge

Progress remains slow one month after vaccination campaigns began in earnest in northeast Syria, as well as in the northwest (see: [Syria Update 7 June 2021](#)). Making more vaccines available to more people is a moral and strategic imperative, and it will be the only way to effectively end the risk of COVID outbreaks. In addition to logistical challenges that affect vaccination, including supply, vaccine **hesitancy** remains a hindrance. Syrian authorities lack the tools available to governments elsewhere, such as **incentives** for vaccination and restrictions on non-vaccinated populations. In northwest Syria, efforts must be taken to ensure vaccine supply is not halted if the

### Think-Feel-Do Framework for COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Efforts

Stage	Think	Feel	Do
Hierarchy of Effects-based Appeal	Rational	Emotional	Behavioural
Objective	Awareness and Knowledge	Linking, preference, and conviction	Get vaccinated
Why	Inform and overcome misinformation	Build trust employing trusted sources	Motivate action
How	Multiple media	Word-of-mouth	Go to your market
Who	Need local media, religious, business, and political leaders to educate	Need “common folks” to reach out to family, friends, and colleagues to build conviction	Need governments and businesses to make it easy to get vaccinated
What	Increase knowledge and directly refute inaccurate claims	Create FOMO (“Fear of Missing Out”), both socially and economically	Incentivise action and facilitate convenience

Source: Adapted from [World Economic Forum](#)

cross-border mechanism is not re-authorized, while pressure can be applied to ensure the northeast continues to receive doses through Damascus via COVAX. Donors, INGOs, and local implementing partners should also consider approaches to address the apparent lag in vaccine demand. The World Economic Forum has proposed a “**Think-Feel-Do**” Framework, which takes as its first priority awareness raising and responding to the main drivers of hesitancy. Second, it advocates developing trust for the vaccine among the local population through initiatives carried out by civil society actors, trusted social and religious figures, and media platforms. Third, it suggests employing proactive tactics to reach people who remain unsure, especially vulnerable populations such as the elderly, people with underlying conditions, and IDPs. 🌐



## Autonomous Administration Suspends Menbij Recruitment, to Review Law

MENBIJ CITY, ALEPPO GOVERNORATE

On 24 June, the Autonomous Administration suspended compulsory recruitment in Menbij and referred the issue to “competent authorities” to review the conscription law itself. The suspension and further review of conscription policies were **announced** in a joint statement by

There is also a risk that half-measures in response to public rage will give cause for yet more protests.

the Autonomous Administration, the Menbij Military Council, and local notables. On 31 May, region-wide protests against the Syrian Democratic Forces’ (SDF) conscription policy prompted a deadly crackdown, particularly in the city of Menbij in northern Syria, leaving dozens of protesters killed and wounded. Protestors demand an end to the mandatory conscription law, and voiced other grievances including fuel quotas, corruption, and Kurdish minority rule (see: [Syria Update 7 June 2021](#)). Eight demonstrators **were killed**, and more than 30 others were injured as security forces sought to break up protests. Conscription **was halted** in Menbij previously, as a result of the deadly unrest.

### The SDF’s tough balancing act

The strategic importance of Menbij and its **particular sensitivity** have forced the SDF to respond to popular demands by reconsidering conscription, albeit while failing to implement core reforms such as the exemption of teachers. Such a response may be necessary for an SDF that is hoping to block outside forces from destabilising the city and the northeast more broadly. Menbij is the only major city west of the Euphrates River that remains under the control of the SDF; it is seen either as a western beachhead allowing the SDF to project power to the northwest and fend off the eastward advances of Turkish-backed armed groups, or as a vulnerable appendage of northeast Syria that is hemmed

in by hostile military parties: the Syrian National Army to the northwest and Government of Syria forces on the southern and western sides. The decision to suspend recruitment may kick off a vicious circle by demonstrating that large-scale public resistance against the Autonomous Administration produces results. There is also a risk that half-measures in response to public rage will give cause for yet more protests. 🌐



## Al Bab: Water Scarcity Rises in Northern Rural Aleppo

AL BAB, ALEPPO GOVERNORATE

On 30 June, activists launched a social media **campaign** called “Al Bab Is Thirsty” to highlight the current water crisis in the city. During a meeting between city notables and the head of Al Bab local council, Mustafa Othman, the latter **highlighted** several factors in the current water crisis: the depletion of four of the city’s twelve wells; overconsumption by Al Bab residents; and the local council’s inability to fill the city’s main water tank (Jabal Akil Tank), due to low groundwater levels and the high cost of fuel for pumps. Water scarcity has

## Water and wheat will likely be key destabilising factors across many communities in Syria over the next year.

driven an **increase**, and instability, in the price of water tanks, which have been the main alternate supply modality for the majority of the residents over the past few years. Currently, the cost of a delivery by a water truck (holding 4 cubic meters) ranges between 13 and 15 Turkish Lira (approx. 1.50-1.73 USD), adding to the burdens of vulnerable local residents amidst the deterioration of the economy and lack of livelihood opportunities.

### What made the city thirsty?

Since its recapture from the Islamic State in February 2017, Al Bab city has suffered from multiple water shortages. The Government of Syria has shut off the water supply from Al-Khafsa to Ayn al-Bayda water plant, the city's main source of water since 2017. Consequently, the residents of Al Bab and its surrounding towns have begun to rely more heavily on groundwater as a primary alternative. However, the steadily growing population, currently estimated at 97,000, has led to the overexploitation and depletion of many wells. It is worth noting that the local council **constructed two large water tanks** in the city in July 2020. According to local reports, the project has not been successful due to the low levels of groundwater, and the prohibitive cost of pumping enough water to fill the tanks.

Water and wheat will likely be key destabilising factors across many communities in Syria over the next year. The poor rainfall

season, which led to water shortages and a lean harvest, has already caused tensions in northern Syria. The water shortage is exacerbated by the weaponisation of water provision by conflict actors, especially the Government of Syria, the Autonomous Administration, and Turkey, as well as the mismanagement and overexploitation of groundwater. ❄️



## Price of Subsidised Sugar and Rice Raised

### DAMASCUS

**O**n 27 June, **media sources** reported that the prices of subsidised rice and sugar purchased using the smart card system would be raised from 600 SYP to 1,000 SYP per kilogram in Government-controlled areas, as of 4 July. According to the Government of Syria, the rising cost of sugar and rice imports is a drain on its coffers. A reported 2.9 million families obtain these commodities through the smart card system and the Government of Syria is asking them to bear a larger part of the cost.

### Food support strained

Any change in the price of staple foods is an unwelcome shock for a population on the brink of

starvation. Currently, more than 12.4 million Syrians (roughly 60 percent) **are food insecure**, and 1.3 million are severely food insecure. While the causes of Syria's **hunger crisis** are complex and multifaceted, economic circumstances are particularly important. The **Operations and Policy Center** (OPC) recently published data indicating that although people in Damascus have one of the longest workweeks in the world, their spending falls below the global poverty line. Roughly 90 percent of the Syrian pound's value has evaporated since 2011. A large portion of Damascenes (and indeed all Syrians) rely on external sources of income to support themselves. According to the OPC report, 25 percent rely on remittances from abroad, while 41 percent rely on cash assistance from relief organisations. These will remain critical lifelines for the foreseeable future, particularly as salaries stagnate and prices rise. ❄️

## >> 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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### **Syrians return to camps seeking aid as economic crash bites**

**What Does it Say?** It is worrying that the situation has deteriorated to such an extent in the country that people are going back to camps, which are usually seen as a last resort due to the abysmal conditions there.

**Reading Between the Lines:** This issue is likely counter productive to Western goals which aim at closing down camps as a means of restoring stability.

**Source:** [The New Humanitarian](#)

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

**Date:** [28 June 2021](#)

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### **Syria: No new deal on Idlib with Russia and Turkey, says official**

**What Does it Say?** Despite speculation about the unraveling of the Turkey Russia deal concerning the M4 highway, which was brought about by a high profile translation error, the 2020 deal is still in place.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The error in translation has stoked the flames of fear regarding the fate of Idlib. Although worrying, the current deal is still in place.

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

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

**Date:** [1 July 2021](#)

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### **Tel Abyad | Turkish forces renew rocket attacks on SDF-held areas**

**What Does it Say?** Rocket fire from Turkish forces on SDF-held territory in Tell Abyad continues.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Clashes between the Turkish-backed forces and the SDF have been steadily escalating. Meanwhile the Autonomous Administration is facing mounting popular discontent from within.

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

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

**Date:** [29 June 2021](#)



## >> Open Source Annex Continued

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### **Networks, Mobilisation, and Resistance in the 2021 Presidential Election in Syria**

**What Does it Say?** The article discusses how the Government of Syria is able to mobilise supporters in some areas but not in others. The article uses the presidential elections as a case study.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The article sheds an interesting light on the process the government of Syria uses to mobilise support, and it is an interesting way to assess the strengths of its local networks.

**Source:** [European University Institute](#)

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

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

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### **The sanctimonious destruction of Syria: Washington starves Syrians to save them**

**What Does it Say?** An article discussing the US's use of its economic supremacy to starve nations into submission.

**Reading Between the Lines:** Sanctions do not cause foreign governments to

knuckle under. Such is the case with Syria, as it has proven time and again that the Government is willing to let its people suffer rather than capitulate to any demands.

**Source:** [Anti War](#)

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

**Date:** [30 June 2021](#)

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### **Slow Action from Countries with Citizens in al-Hol Camp: AANES**

**What Does it Say?** The Autonomous Administration has once again criticised Western states for delaying the repatriation of their own citizens from al-Hol camp.

**Reading Between the Lines:** in most cases, repatriation of citizens who were affiliated with IS is a politically toxic proposition. As a result, domestic political priority has forced the Autonomous Administration to shoulder the burden.

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

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

**Date:** [30 June 2021](#)

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### **France: The West will stop aid to Syria if it is not delivered across the border**

**What Does it Say?** The French delegation to the UN has stated that Western powers will cut aid to Syria if the cross-border aid mechanism lapses absent Security Council re-authorisation.

**Reading Between the Lines:** The West has essentially drawn a line in the sand ahead of the UN vote. Unfortunately, the Government of Syria has shown time and again that it prioritises its own wants and needs over its citizens.

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

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

**Date:** [2 July 2021](#)

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Contact:

[syria-update@coar-global.org](mailto:syria-update@coar-global.org)

