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Dar'a Deal Collapses amid Violent Regional Escalation

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More than 10,000 people fled Dar'a al-Balad amid heavy bombardment after the agreement to end the siege there collapsed.
Image courtesy of Nabaa Media Foundation.

> 0 On 29 July, Government of Syria forces began a major military push in Dar'a al-Balad. Intense clashes broke out as the 4th Division, 9th Division, Military Security, and local militias sought to advance into the area amid heavy bombardment via surface-to-surface missiles, mortar shells, and tank fire, marking the deadliest and most intense fighting in southern Syria since 2018. The violence caused an unknown number of casualties — likely dozens in Dar'a al-Balad and in other communities where reprisals took place — and roughly 10,500 people were displaced from Dar'a al-Balad as of 27 July, according to the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP). The sudden military escalation follows the collapse of the agreement between the Central Negotiations Committee and Government forces (see: [Syria Update 26 July 2021](#)) to lift the partial siege imposed on Dar'a al-Balad in late June (see: [Syria Update 5 July 2021](#)).

In an effort to gain leverage and ease the military pressure on their confederates in Dar'a al-Balad, now-reconciled former armed opposition fighters have launched counter-attacks on Government positions in villages and towns in Dar'a Governorate, including Jasem, Al-Yadouda, Enkhel, Al-Harak, Sayda, Al-Naeimah, and Taseil. During the clashes, local armed groups reportedly **detained** an estimated 87 Government fighters and confiscated their weapons. On 31 July, local sources reported that armed opposition groups released some Government fighters as a gesture of goodwill. In response to the counter-attacks, Government forces intensified their bombardment across



Graffiti in Dar'a reads: "The siege increases our determination and resolve." Image courtesy of Dar'a al-Balad media activist "XTAMA".

Dar'a Governorate, killing **more than 26 people**, including women and children.

Either peace or mass displacement

The situation across southern Syria remains tense, and it is subject to rapid change. On 2 August, local and media sources **indicated** that the 4th Division continues to attempt to advance on Dar'a al-Balad amid bombardment via tank shelling, following the expiration of a **ceasefire** that went into effect across Dar'a Governorate on 29 July. Moreover, Government reinforcements have gathered around Jasem, in northern Dar'a Governorate. Meanwhile, according to local sources, the Central Negotiations Committee and Dar'a notables have formed a unified delegation to begin negotiations with Government forces to end the military operations. During the negotiations, the Government forces reportedly threatened the Dar'a local delegation with escalated

attacks if wanted persons do not displace to northern Syria. The Dar'a committee continues to reject this demand. Negotiations were also held in Dar'a city between General Asad Allah, the recently appointed commander of Russian forces in southern Syria, and a Dar'a delegation on 1 August in an attempt to contain the situation. Commander Allah **announced** another general ceasefire in southern Syria for 24 hours, with the option of extending to 48 hours. In the meantime, Allah will conduct discussions with security and military leaders in Damascus. Relatedly, media sources reported that on 2 August, Syrian Defence Minister Ali Ayoub and Russian officers arrived in Dar'a city to parlay with the Central Negotiations Committee.

Local differences, regional fallout

Southern Syria has not seen a military escalation of this magnitude since the 2018

reconciliation agreements were reached. The escalation is indicative of the inability of the Syrian Government and opposition-leaning southern Syria communities to reconcile their fundamental differences. The outbreak of violence followed only days after the monthlong partial siege of Dar'a al-Balad ended. The resolution to the siege had been cause for cautious optimism, although its breakdown reflects disquieting realities about the local community. Government interlocutors apparently exploited differences between members of the Central Negotiations Committee, which had reached the agreement on behalf of the community. Local sources indicate that the recent agreement faltered because of foul play on the part of committee members: Although the public version of the agreement stipulated that Government forces would erect three checkpoints, the actual agreement signed by a small contingent of the committee permitted full Government control in addition to the handover of most small and medium weapons, conditions viewed by the community as red lines. Unless local actors can unite around a vision and set of objectives to preserve the semi-independent status of Dar'a, tensions will persist, violence is likely, and further displacement may be inevitable.


The latest escalation reflects the Syrian Government's desire for absolute control over Dar'a as it seeks to deflate the remaining pockets of quasi-opposition control in southern Syria. In 2018, Russia brokered the southern reconciliation agreement between the armed opposition groups and Government forces in Dar'a city. Russia at the time aspired to provide a

different model of reconciliation by courting the Syrian opposition and attempting to reimpose stability by keeping the armed actors in place. The model contrasted with the Government of Syria's unremitting vision that only by taking opposition fighters off the battlefield — either by killing or displacing them (and their families) — could it restore control over breakaway communities. Russia's approach was by comparison highly conciliatory, and it held out the promise of preserving more of the communities' social fabric. Moscow's tactics have not succeeded in Dar'a al-Balad. Russia's failure has been amplified by a lack of trust and outbreaks of violence between the two sides, particularly as the Syrian Government continues to violate the terms of the agreement.

Rough neighbourhood

The military escalation and continued instability in southern Syria pose a threat to the security of neighbouring Jordan and Israel. Since the reopening of the border between Syria and Jordan in autumn 2018, some months after Government forces took control of Nasib crossing, smuggling and illicit networks have proliferated. Despite restrictions and partial border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Jordan has on several occasions declared its concern over drug trafficking across its border with Syria. However, Jordan **resolved** to reopen the Nasib border, re-establishing unrestricted trade between the two countries as it seeks an economic revival following the pandemic. However, the recent tensions in southern Syria have stymied this plan and prompted yet another temporary border closure. Jordan is caught between a rock and a hard place. Opening the border

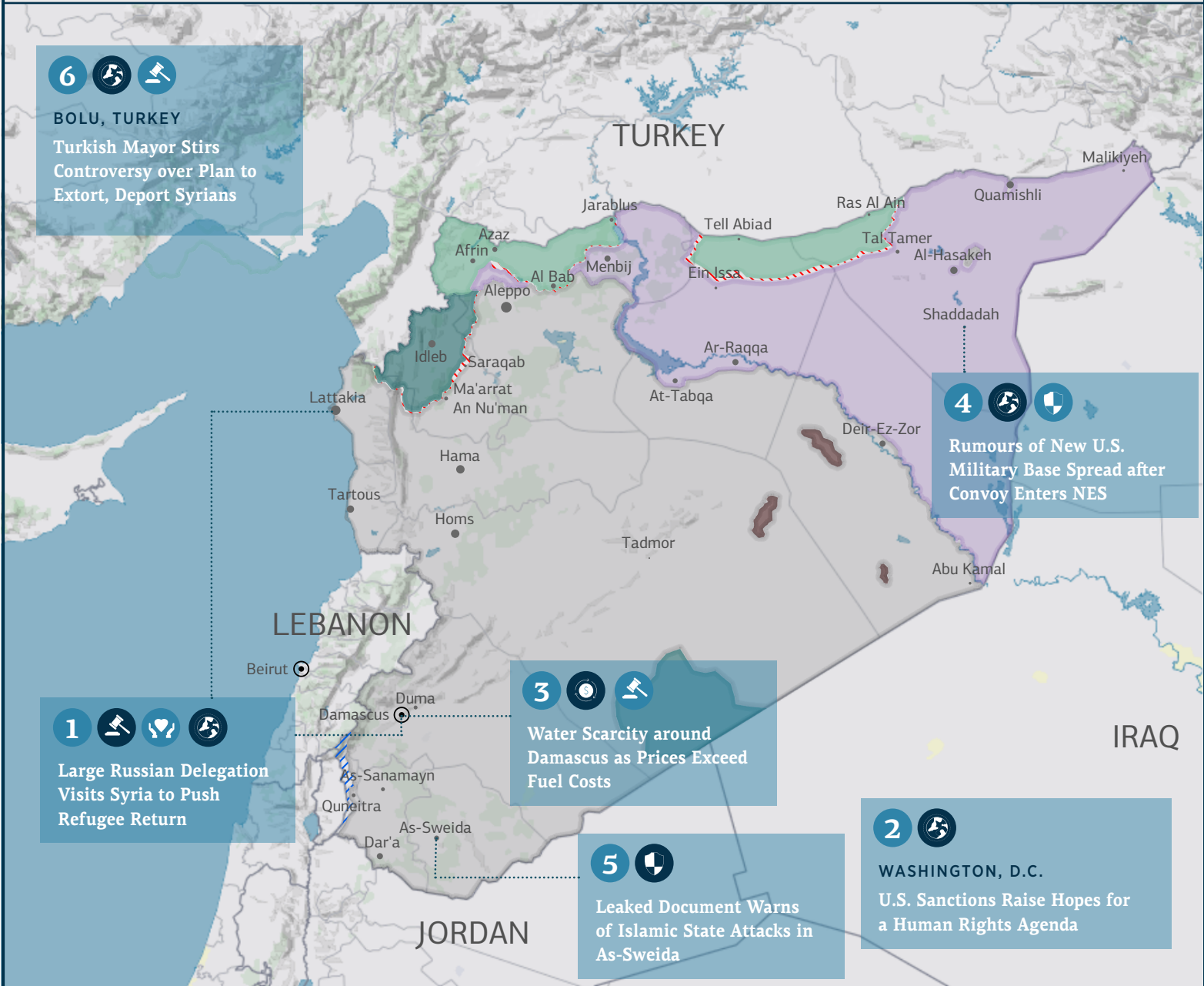
will increase the volume of trade and the efforts needed to interdict smuggling, while maintaining border security will remain a challenge given the proliferation of armed groups and Iranian militias in southern Syria. In turn, Israel views Iran's growing influence through associated foreign and domestic militias in southwestern Syria as a national security risk, and its continued limited-scale air strikes will not diminish the Iranian threat on its borders. As with its attempts to reconcile the interests of former opposition fighters and Damascus, Russia is also struggling to live up to its role as the guarantor of a southern Syria border security agreement, for which its commitments to Jordan and Israel are viewed as fundamental.

Meanwhile in Dar'a, the UN Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen **has called** for a de-escalation and ceasefire in southern Syria, and allowing humanitarian assistance to reach those affected in Dar'a Governorate. If the parties fail to reach an agreement and violence resumes, it will be difficult to continue to meet humanitarian needs in the area, and projects across the affected communities risk being impacted. Mobility, access, and basic security will be affected. Moreover, restrictions imposed by Government forces on humanitarian service providers will likely target communities that are at odds with Damascus. 

Syria Update

“ The rash, spastic decision-making of the Trump era is likely past, yet the U.S.’s long-term strategy for Syria remains undefined, and until achievable objectives are laid out, questions over the U.S.’s actions there will continue to swirl. ”

See: Point No. 3 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)



Large Russian Delegation Visits Syria to Push Refugee Return

DAMASCUS AND LATTAKIA

On 26 July, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with members of a large Russian delegation to discuss refugee return. The Syrian and Russian delegations jointly affirmed that “the return of the displaced Syrians to their areas liberated from terrorism is a national priority for the Syrian state.” The 230-person Russian delegation included presidential envoy Alexander Lavrentiev, head of Russian coordination on refugee return, Chief of the Russian National Defence Control Center Mikhail Mizintsev, and Russian Ambassador Alexander Yefimov. The delegation, dispatched by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defence Minister Segey Shoygu, also included representatives of 30 federal executive bodies and five Russian regions. Sessions were reportedly attended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other agencies. The Syrian Minister of Local Administration, Hussein Makhlouf, explained during the conference that around 5 million internally displaced Syrians and 2.5 million refugees have returned as security conditions have improved.

Relatedly, Russia announced the opening of a Russian naval academy for children in Lattakia. The academy is a branch of the Nakhimov Naval College,

In the absence of progress measured against these yardsticks, Russia may view the return of refugees as a more realistic intermediate-stage goal that can unlock more expansive relief works, prompt more international support for Damascus, and lower the resolve of Western powers that seek to keep up pressure on the Government of Syria through isolation and deprivation.

established in Saint Petersburg in 1944. According to the report, the new Syrian branch of the academy will aim to educate Syrian children and inculcate Russian culture and ideals.


Fool me once, shame on you

The large delegation sends multiple messages to Damascus and the international community. Most notably, it suggests that Moscow will not relent on its full-court press to repatriate Syrian refugees, even after the returns conference it sponsored in Damascus in late 2020 generated little enthusiasm and even less action (see: Syria Update 2 November 2020). Moscow and Damascus share a common hope of returning Syrians from abroad, which they view as a trump card to be played against regional host states and the Western donors who are viewed as the necessary funders of reconstruction.

The armed conflict in Syria has frozen in a strategic stalemate. A negotiated peace brokered through UN processes is no nearer now than it was when the Constitutional Committee began two years ago (see: Syria Constitutional Committee: Preliminary Background Note 11 October, 2019). In the absence of progress measured against these yardsticks, Russia may view the return of refugees as

a more realistic intermediate-stage goal that can unlock more expansive relief works, prompt more international support for Damascus, and lower the resolve of Western powers that seek to keep up pressure on the Government of Syria through isolation and deprivation. Russia’s special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, asserted that rebuilding the Syrian economy and creating conditions for returns are top priorities. This suggests that return efforts will likely continue. That said, Syrian Minister Hussein Makhlouf’s claims concerning returns are specious and out of proportion. Roughly 6 million Syrians are internally displaced, and it is doubtful that 2.5 million have returned. The claim may suggest that the Government of Syria is double counting, including the tally of “go and see” visits, or counting regular population movement towards returns. Whatever the case, the numbers appear highly inflated to allow the Government to paint a rosier picture than reality would allow.

Finally, children’s military initiation by Russia remains common wherever Moscow wields influence, particularly in post-Soviet states. In some respects, the naval academy builds on long-standing USSR-Syrian military relations, which created a pipeline for a Cold War class of Syrian military

officers to rise through the ranks via Soviet training. Syrians may see the academy as an indicator of the ongoing militarisation of Syrian society, where economic opportunities, privilege, and power are clustered around warfighting and the war economy. 



U.S. Sanctions Raise Hopes for a Human Rights Agenda


WASHINGTON, D.C.

On 28 July, the U.S. Treasury announced a round of **new sanctions**, using counter-terror powers to levy special designations on a variety of Syrian actors. Included among the designations are Government of Syria prison facilities and the noted opposition group Ahrar al-Sharqiya, backed by Turkey. According to **international media**, Ahrar al-Sharqiya is responsible for killing a Syrian Kurdish politician, Hervin Khalad, instrumentalising

Although sanctions are nothing new, the focus on violations of human rights does open the door to future efforts toward legal accountability in Syria. The move falls in line with the growing emphasis on accountability for human rights violations and breaches of international law among the international community and key Syria donors.

IS militants, and participating in Turkish military operation against Syrian Kurds. The Saraya al-Areen group, affiliated with the Syrian government has also been placed on the sanctions list for repeatedly violating the ceasefire in Idleb.

Portraying Accountability

Although sanctions are nothing new, the focus on violations of human rights does open the door to future efforts toward legal accountability in Syria. The move falls in line with the growing emphasis on accountability for human rights violations and breaches of international law among the international community and key Syria donors. The sanctions placed on Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the Turkish-backed group, likely serve as a warning to Turkey. Of note, the listing follows only weeks after the U.S. State Department **included Turkey** on a list of states using child soldiers, a claim rejected by Ankara and a provocative gesture considering Turkey's centrality to NATO. While the sanctions, particularly those targeting Syrian prisons, may not have a major immediate impact on the conflict in Syria, they do leave room for future accountability measures in the future. 



Water Scarcity around Damascus as Prices Exceed Fuel Costs

DAMASCUS, AS-SWEIDA

Amid shortages, local and **media sources** report that drinking water in Damascus and its suburbs has become more expensive than subsidised fuel. Market prices for a 1.5-litre bottle of drinking water reportedly range from 1,000 to 2,000 SYP (0.3 to 0.6 USD). Meanwhile, the official price of subsidised fuel remains 750 SYP (0.2 USD), although consumers are limited to purchasing 25 litres per week at the subsidised rate. Additional fuel can be purchased on the black market, where the litre price can range between 3,000 to 4,000 SYP (0.9 to 1.2 USD). Household water issues are also widespread. Protests have erupted on several occasions amidst shortages, and people have resorted to water trucks. Officially, the cost of a water truck delivery is 9,000 SYP (2.7 USD); however, high demand has increased the price on the black market to around 12,000 SYP (3.7 USD).

Portentous potables

While there is no set price for water in Damascus and its surroundings, demand issues have been exacerbated by mismanagement and the heightened need brought on by hot summer conditions. Compounding the issue is the scarcity of the fuel and electricity needed to keep homes and workplaces cool. Local sources

note that these shortages have also blunted the pumping capacity of water stations. There is serious danger associated with a lack of clean drinking water, as individuals may turn to unsafe alternatives. Such sources of water can lead to serious **waterborne diseases**. The result may be a cascading effect of increased health problems in Syria, a country whose health system is already stretched thin. ❄️



Rumours of New U.S. Military Base Spread after Convoy Enters NES

SHADDADAH, AL-HASAKEH

On 24 July, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) **reported** that a large U.S. military convoy entered the Shaddadah base, south of Al-Hasakeh in northeast Syria, with the reported aim of establishing a new base in the area. The **convoy** of a reported 75 trucks, most of them carrying military vehicles, entered from Al-Waleed border crossing with the Kurdistan region of Iraq. In addition, two military helicopters carried equipment, ammunition, and soldiers. A hub for the American forces and their ground military patrols, the Shaddadah base is also used to control the Iraqi borders in the northern and eastern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor. The recent expansion and reinforcements will likely make Shaddadah the most important base of the International Coalition in eastern Syria. Earlier this month, on

19 July, an International Coalition convoy **entered** northeast Syria from the Al-Waleed crossing, heading towards bases in Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor. The convoy consisted of 30 trucks loaded with materiel and armoured vehicles.

No more endless wars — except in Syria

This enlargement of the U.S. military presence in northeast Syria signals, at least in the short-term, that the U.S. has ongoing strategic objectives in the country. This will be cautiously reassuring to those advocating for a prolonged U.S. presence in Syria in the face of the Biden administration's emphasis on putting an end to "forever wars." That said, the actual purpose of the latest U.S. military convoys is not entirely clear. The SOHR's **claim** that the convoy aims to establish a new base is unsubstantiated, and local sources indicate that it most likely aims to expand and reinforce the Shaddadah base itself. Nonetheless, rumours that the U.S. will expand its footprint have been amplified by the state-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and Russia Today in an effort to discredit the U.S. as an occupying force in Syria.

Of note, this comes as the U.S. is pivoting toward a much-discussed drawdown in Iraq — a **political demand** by Iraq's prime minister — alongside its near-total military withdrawal from Afghanistan. In both countries, some two decades of counter-insurgency and state building led by the U.S. have failed to bring about durable institutions, sustained economic development, or peace. Introducing further military reinforcements and stationing more troops in eastern Syria may assist

the U.S. forces in controlling the Iraq-Syria border, with the aim of containing Iran's growing influence in the region. Such a manoeuvre may also stabilise the U.S.'s position in northeast Syria ahead of changes to the troop deployment in Iraq, since the U.S. presence in eastern Syria is reliant on access and supply lines fed through Iraq. The rash, spastic decision-making of the Trump era is likely past, yet the U.S.'s long-term strategy for Syria remains undefined, and until achievable objectives are laid out, questions over the U.S.'s actions there will continue to swirl. ❄️



Leaked Document Warns of Islamic State Attacks in As-Sweida

AS-SWEIDA

An internal Government document warning of an intended Islamic State (IS) attack in As-Sweida Governorate has been **leaked** by activists. The report was sent from the police chief in Rural Damascus to the Interior Minister and dated 15 July. The leak reportedly came as an attempt to protect citizens, and included details about the intended locations of the attacks. The news renewed fears of IS sleeper cells for communities in and around As-Sweida.

The IS fear factor

The news sowed fear among residents in As-Sweida, a community still reeling from a

string of **IS attacks** in July 2018, which killed 166 people. Rumours have circulated in recent months of the Syrian Government relocating former IS fighters to neighbouring Dar'a Governorate, which has sown distrust about Damascus's intentions. The fear sparked by the news likewise indicates IS's continued psychological influence, particularly in As-Sweida, despite the fact it no longer meaningfully holds territory. Whether such reports are real or fabricated they contribute to a narrative that Damascus has no compunction about using the threat of IS to keep peripheral communities in a state of flux and fear, especially amidst recent military developments and instability in Dar'a. ❄️



Turkish Mayor Stirs Controversy over Plan to Extort, Deport Syrians

BOLU, TURKEY:

On 28 July, **media sources** reported that the mayor of the northwestern Turkish city of Bolu, Tanju Özcan, announced during a press conference that he would submit a proposal to the city council for a tenfold increase in the water bills of “foreigners and immigrants.” Bolu hosts roughly 1,500 Syrian refugees. The comments have sparked widespread controversy and were **condemned** by human rights organisations. The NGO Refugee Rights Turkey **announced** it had filed an official lawsuit against the mayor,

describing his decision as “racist” against Syrian and other foreign refugees. Since he became mayor in 2019, Özcan has been known for unvarnished statements and punitive actions singling out Syrian refugees, including decisions **banning the delivery of aid** and denying them work permits. Özcan stated, “They did not go when we cut aid, and they did not go when we stopped issuing work permits, so we have now decided to take new measures.”

One more in a long line of anti-refugee measures and sentiments

Özcan's statements come at a time when incitement campaigns against Syrian refugees are escalating inside Turkey, as several opposition figures are calling for them to return to their country. Özcan is a member of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition party. While such statements are part of the routine politicking between the opposition parties and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), they should also be seen as evidence of the same reactionary, anti-refugee sentiment that has risen worldwide in recent years. Campaign pledges and political talking points can translate into actions with real-world consequences, and an escalation in anti-Syrian refugee sentiment may lead to dangerous outcomes if AKP loses the next presidential election, expected in June 2023. In **response** to Özcan's comments, the deputy president of the CHP stated that such proposals contradict the party's policies, but this will be cold comfort, as he followed this up by noting that the “refugee issue in Turkey will be solved by sending refugees safely to their countries” if or when CHP comes to power. While AKP has gone to

some lengths to court Syrians, the Turkish opposition has played the refugee card in the successive parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections since the country opened its borders in 2011 and received 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees. Opposition leaders, especially from the CHP, have pledged to return the Syrians to their country and normalise relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime when they come to power. ❄️

>> 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.

Troops to stay put in Syria even as Biden seeks to end America’s ‘forever wars’

What Does it Say? Although the Biden administration has stated that it seeks to put an end to America’s “forever wars,” it has no plans to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: The U.S. has publicly stated that it will continue to support the SDF in its fight against IS; however, the U.S. continues to lack strategic direction in Syria.

Source: Politico

Language: English

Date: 27 July 2021

Syria tells OPCW that Israel has destroyed the Douma cylinders

What Does it Say? Syria is blaming Israel for the destruction of two gas cylinders which the OPCW designated as crucial evidence for the 2018 chemical weapon attack in Douma.

Reading Between the Lines: The blame-shifting is pure politics. The Syrian Government did not allow the cylinders to be taken out of the country for examination. Moreover, the cylinders were transported without the OPCW’s consent prior to their destruction in Israeli airstrikes.

Source: Brian Whitaker - Medium

Language: English

Date: 24 July 2021

Russia Confirms Strike of Iranian Stronghold by Israel

What Does it Say? The Russian Ministry of Defence stated that the Syrian Air Defence foiled Israeli airstrikes in southern Damascus targeting Iranian bases.

Reading Between the Lines: Unusually, Syrian air defences have reportedly downed numerous Israeli missiles in recent months. Whether the reportedly successful interceptions are true, or merely unsubstantiated claims is not clear.

Source: The Syrian Observer

Language: English

Date: 28 July 2021

>> Open Source Annex Continued

Al-Assad puts the future of Syria in the hands of the military

What Does it Say? Bashar al-Assad was sworn in at the Republican Palace in the presence of a large number of military officials. In his speech, he emphasised the need to have “faith in the military,” leading some to observe the militarisation of the Syrian state at the highest levels.

Reading Between the Lines: In a sense, al-Assad has made it clear that he will be using the military for the foreseeable future to keep the country firmly in his grip, and those without “faith” in his rule — cemented by the force of arms — will face consequences.

Source: [Enab Baladi](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [27 July 2021](#)

“Easy” success for the faction members and failure of the students. The education crisis in northern Syria in 4 points

What Does it Say? The education sector in northeast Syria is in critical condition. It is divided into three separate programmes: one run by administrations in Turkish-controlled areas, one by the Interim Government, and one by the Salvation Government.

Reading Between the Lines: Myriad risks are present, in addition to the possibility of systemic collapse in the vital sector. Among them, students run the risk of following curricula that may not be accredited or recognised later on.

Source: [Syria TV](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [26 July 2021](#)

The Search for a Syria Strategy. What Biden Can Learn From Trump’s Successes and Failures

What Does it Say? The Biden administration’s approach to Syria is yet to be determined. The administration has not taken any decisive action on the issue.

Reading Between the Lines: The U.S. has failed to reach and meaningfully pursue a coherent policy agenda in Syria. The current administration has yet to put forward a new approach, yet decision avoidance alone will not allow the administration to circumvent the pitfalls to which the previous administration fell prey.

Source: [Foreign Affairs](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [27 July 2021](#)

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