

Syria Update

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Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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Abdullah in Moscow: Jordan Sets Its Own Course on Syria

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Jordan's King Abudllah II in talks with Russian President Putin. Image courtesy of @RusEmbJordan.

On 23 August, King Abdullah II of Jordan met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the side-lines of a military technology forum in Moscow to discuss bilateral cooperation, Afghanistan, and regional affairs, most notably the crisis in Syria. In brief public remarks delivered after their meeting, Abdullah praised Russia's capacity to advance a resolution to the Syria crisis, stating that it has the "most stable role in being able to move that process forward." Putin expressed hope for continuing to work with Jordan, including to "normal[ise] the situation in Syria."

The visit is the latest in a series of moves by the king that will raise eyebrows in the West. It comes one month after a meeting between Abdullah and U.S. President Joe Biden, during which the king proposed a roadmap for Syria that entails easing the Caesar sanctions and some degree of recognition of the Government of Syria. In that sense, the king's pitch was a bid for acknowledgment of what Amman views as Bashar al-Assad's staying power. Abdullah doubled down on the position during a widely shared television interview in which he stated that Syrian refugees in Jordan "are not going to go back soon" due to dismal conditions in Syria and the lack of political progress, adding "there's nothing to go back to." Abdullah stated further that the international community must acknowledge the role of Russia and find realistic ways to "talk with the regime."

The claims do not arise in a vacuum. As Jordan faces tightening economic and labour conditions, domestic

ennui, and the fallout of a coup attempt, leadership in Amman is casting about for stability. For many in Jordan, stronger ties with the Government of Syria are inevitably part of that plan. As a result, Syria is now Exhibit A for the ways the kingdom's own interests require it to take a more aggressive stand that will place it on a crash course with its most important Western backers.

Foreign crisis, domestic fallout

Abdullah's remarks are a reminder of the extent to which the Syria crisis has become a driver of Jordanian politics, foreign and domestic. The refugee crisis through which the kingdom hosts 669,000 registered Syrian refugees — perhaps half the total figure — is a burden on services and a source of frustration for Jordanian jobseekers. In addition, Jordan has been cut off from one of its largest trading partners through the combined effects of sanctions on Syria and intermittent border closures. Jordan's unenviable position means that its hopes of increased trade through southern Syria essentially require that the Syrian Arab Army restore full control over the northern side of their shared border. Making matters worse is the regional drug trade, centred in Syria, but using Jordan as a transit artery for high-value Gulf markets.

In response to these issues, Jordan's roadmap for Syria consists of several key pillars. First, Jordan seeks post-COVID economic


recovery by opening its borders with Syria and restoring commercial trade. The M5 highway that connects Jordan and Syria via the Nasib crossing point is perhaps the most important crossing in the entire Levant, as it links consumer markets in the Arab Gulf with producers spanning Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and even Turkey (see: Syria Update 18-24 October 2018). Second, in the longer term, there is also a hope in Jordan of capitalising on the economic boon of reconstruction in Syria through local construction and engineering firms, the importation of construction materials through Jordanian ports, and by hosting international companies in the relative safety of Amman. Third, Jordan also aims to burnish its credentials as a regional intermediary capable of taking the lead in stabilising its foundering neighbours, including Iraq and Lebanon, in addition to Syria. For instance, on 20 August, the U.S. reportedly proposed a scheme to use Jordan as a waypoint to supply ailing Lebanon with electricity. If this plan is executed, it will require coordination between Jordan and neighbouring countries that share an interlinked regional grid, including Syria and Egypt. Fourth, eventually, Jordan hopes to foster large-scale refugee return to Syria, although it remains focused on attracting more substantial international assistance for hosting refugees until returns become possible.

Nasib: Crossroads of the Levant, Regional Economic Engine

\$700 million	Syrian exports through Nasib crossing (2010)
\$940 million	Imports to Syria via Nasib crossing (2010)

A road to nowhere?

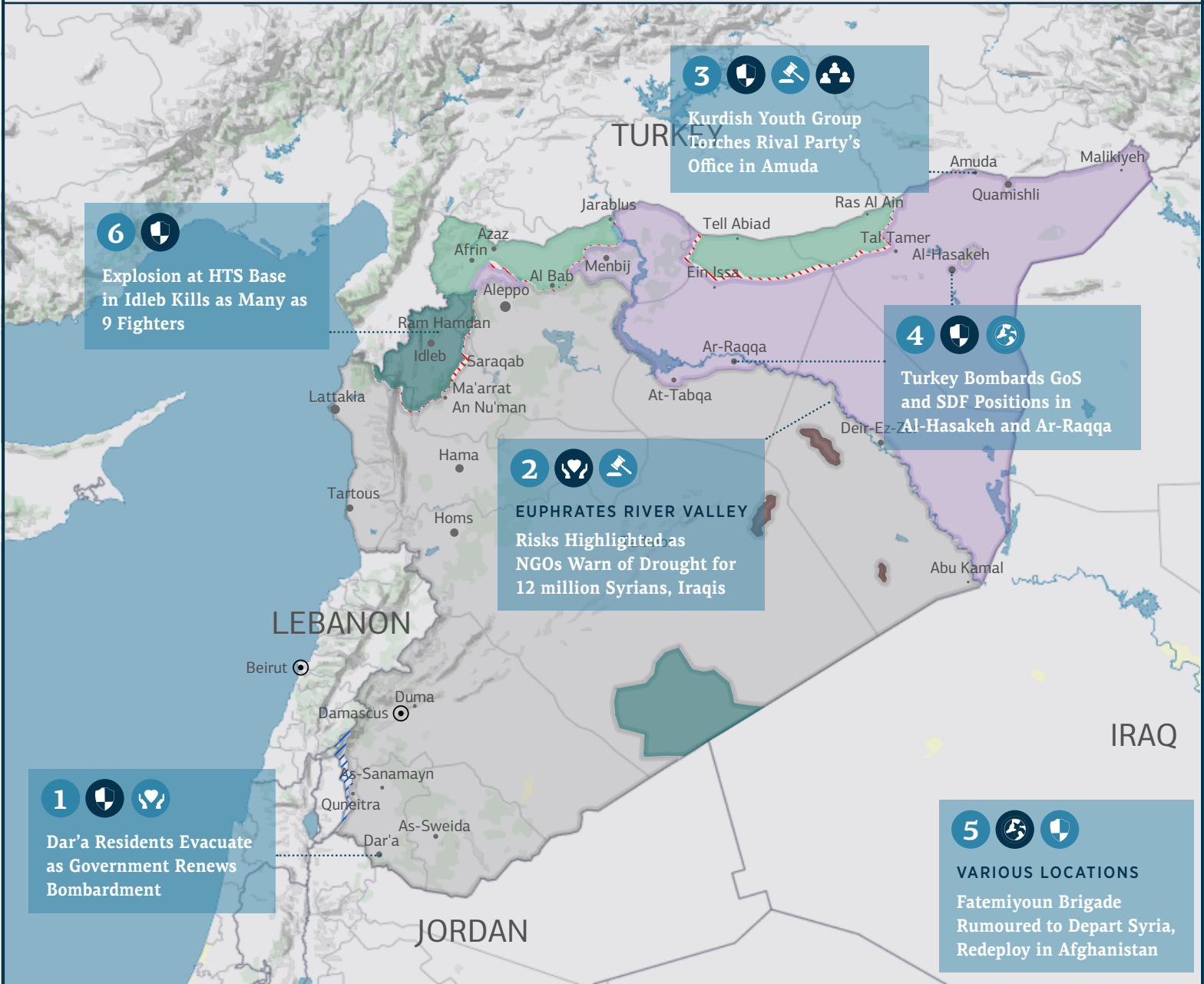
The king's pitch clashes with Western political talking points, but it is not fundamentally misaligned with the dominant currents in the Syria crisis response. Within the response, it is widely recognised that sustainable livelihoods and economic stability — preconditions for refugee return — are impeded by Syria's isolation. More ambitious aid interventions are now being considered to improve conditions in Syria, although the transition away from repeated cycles of unaccountable humanitarian activities toward projects with greater systemic impact has been slow. Donor fatigue threatens this transition, and it risks stanching the support needed by refugee host nations, particularly Jordan and Lebanon. In the meantime, the Government of Syria's siege of Dar'a al-Balad is predicated in part on its desire to control southern Syria to restore trade with Jordan, a potential economic windfall for all involved, but at considerable cost in lives and destruction. The deadly fallout of the siege and the instability that persists in Dar'a city and in communities such as Tafas and As-Sanamayn demonstrate that Damascus cannot bring about stability by force alone. The region's role as a commercial thoroughfare will hinge on this fact. Indeed, the Nasib crossing has **closed** frequently since its opening in 2018 due to local insecurity, while drug trafficking has spread lawlessness in the Syrian-Jordanian desert frontier where it has flourished with the support of Assad regime intermediaries and local smugglers (see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State](#)). Amidst all this, Russia has shown a limited capacity to fulfill its pledges as

a sponsor of reconciliation or a guarantor of international pledges to bring stability. Jordan may show itself capable of brokering greater coordination among all these actors, but it faces a hard road ahead. 

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“ Some Turkish analysts maintain that the attacks do not augur a full-fledged military campaign, and are simply part of Turkey’s strategy to target PKK leaders moving between northern Iraq and eastern Syria. ”

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)



Dar'a Residents Evacuate as Government Renews Bombardment

DAR'A GOVERNORATE

On 26 August, local and media sources reported that 70 people, including 25 women and children, had evacuated from Dar'a al-Balad to northern Syria following a Russian-mediated agreement between the Government of Syria security committee and the Dar'a Central Negotiations Committee. The 24 August preliminary agreement included a demand by the Government of Syria that 10 fighters leave Dar'a al-Balad, and it stipulated that Russian military police would deploy with the 8th Brigade. The deployment of Russian authorities alongside the 8th Brigade's reconciled opposition fighters would allow for monitoring of the ceasefire, lifting the quasi-siege, and ending military escalation in the area.

However, the agreement seemingly broke down after two of the 10 fighters refused to evacuate to northern Syria. In response, the Government of Syria repositioned military reinforcements and began a new round of bombardment in Dar'a al-Balad. Media and local sources indicated that the 4th Division sought to advance into the area amid violent clashes, heavy artillery shelling, and the use of surface-to-surface missiles. At least three civilians were confirmed

In addition, a parallel committee in western Dar'a Governorate has called for a general mobilisation due to the Syrian Government's rejection of peaceful means of de-escalation.

killed due to the violence, at the time of writing. Meanwhile, the Central Negotiations Committee released a statement decrying the breakdown of negotiations with the Government and Russia's failure as a mediator. In addition, a parallel committee in western Dar'a Governorate has called for a general mobilisation due to the Syrian Government's rejection of peaceful means of de-escalation. Meantime, Government forces have targeted Tafas in western Dar'a with rockets and mortar fire, killing two women and injuring dozens.

Stability only through submission


The displacement of some fighters and their families from Dar'a al-Balad signals at least a partial acceptance among the Dar'a community and the Central Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Government's demands and Russia's proposed roadmap to secure the governorate (see: Syria Update 27 August 2021). However, the deal's rapid breakdown demonstrates just how difficult it will be to bring this — or any such proposal — into effect. The situation remains unstable, and more evacuations and civilian displacements are likely as violence continues. It remains to be seen just how widely the renewed clashes will expand throughout southern Syria.

On balance, the violence that has racked the region since 24 June has established that the Government of Syria can achieve its narrow

objectives by imposing military pressure on the region. As we noted during earlier stages of the siege, Dar'a holdouts had — and have — few realistic options for resisting Government force over the long term, particularly when Russia throws its weight behind Damascus to undermine the latent opposition forces. That said, Government forces will struggle for the foreseeable future to contain the insurgency that is entrenched in southern Syria, and no negotiated agreement will bridge the trust gap between Damascus and restive southern communities. Instability is likely to continue to manifest as assassinations and armed attacks across the whole of Dar'a Governorate. Meanwhile, Damascus is unlikely to moderate its aggressive tactics in these communities as it continues in its bid to regain full control over southern Syria.

No shelter in the storm

Meanwhile, media sources have reported that the Directorate of Education in Dar'a Governorate has issued an order that displaced people from Dar'a al-Balad must evacuate the schools in which they have sought shelter. The deadline given is September — the start of the new school year. Local sources indicated that the thousands of IDPs targeted by this order have struck a defiant posture, and do not plan to leave until the military escalation in Dar'a al-Balad ceases, allowing them to return to their homes. Aid implementers who rely on central

distributions in collective shelters should nonetheless prepare for the possibility that Dar'a IDPs will be forced out of the schools. 



Risks Highlighted as NGOs Warn of Drought for 12 million Syrians, Iraqis

EUPHRATES RIVER VALLEY


On 23 August, a group of nine **INGOs issued an appeal** to the international community, highlighting the imminent water crisis threatening Syria and Iraq. Reportedly, over 12 million people will likely experience a severe water crisis due to the ongoing drought. Both the **Euphrates and Tigris** rivers are drying up due to protracted drought conditions, which have been aggravated by water-use policies, regional hydro politics, conflict conditions, and climate change. More than 5 million people in Syria reportedly depend on river water for various uses, including drinking, washing, agriculture,

Climate change is not merely a buzzword in the implementer's toolkit; in Syria, drought preparedness will be fundamental to ensuring the continuity of agriculture projects and others that are at particular risk of interruption, should water levels fall to dangerous lows. Pre-emptive planning will be critical to ensuring resilience.

and electricity. Around 400 square kilometres of agricultural lands in Syria are at risk, including in vital wheat-growing regions that are the bedrock of the country's food security strategy. Worryingly, two hydroelectric plants that provide around 3 million people with electricity face closure as water levels continue to drop.

Not a drop to drink

NGOs and donors working in Syria have been slow to adopt adequate disaster risk reduction frameworks within projects that are sensitive to climate change and drought. As a result, implementers are consistently unprepared for water crises in particular and climate change more generally. In Syria, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin, climate change and higher temperatures have created conditions conducive to more wildfires while worsening the conditions needed for crop-based agriculture. In Syria, the risks of reduced rainfall will be borne disproportionately by those in already marginalised rural areas, in particular the country's agrarian northeast, which is fed in large part by the Euphrates River. Climate change is not merely a buzzword in the implementer's toolkit; in Syria, drought preparedness will be fundamental to ensuring the continuity of agriculture projects and others that are at particular

risk of interruption, should water levels fall to dangerous lows. Pre-emptive planning will be critical to ensuring resilience. 



Kurdish Youth Group Torches Rival Party's Office in Amuda

AMUDA CITY, AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE

On 24 August, **media sources** reported that the Revolutionary Youth Group had burnt down the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (KDP) in Amuda city, Al-Hasakeh countryside on 23 August. The KDP is one of the largest components of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a political rival to the political coalition that rules northeast Syria. Civilians managed to extinguish the fire before it spread to residential buildings near the headquarters. The Revolutionary Youth Group is a highly ideological youth organisation for men and women — including many minors — that operates in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Although the organisation is not officially affiliated with any of the Autonomous Administration's institutions, its cadres are reportedly led by military leaders of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

No Kurdish consensus

KNC offices in areas controlled by the SDF have been repeatedly attacked, including by the People's

Protection Units (YPG), the main component of the SDF. The KNC has called on the SDF's leadership to put an end to the attacks, accusing it of seeking to **undermine intra-Kurdish dialogue** in Syria. One KNC member interpreted the conflagration as a message to the U.S. and the SDF's leadership that their efforts to broker a consensus will not bear fruit. The intra-Kurdish negotiations began in early April 2020, under the auspices of the U.S. State Department and supervised by Mazloum Abdi, the SDF's commander-in-chief. To date, ideological rivalries that reflect resource competition, historical grievances, and competing economic and political interests have impeded rapprochement among Kurdish factions. No breakthrough is expected in the foreseeable future. 🌐



Turkey Bombards GoS and SDF Positions in Al-Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa

AL-HASAKEH; AR-RAQQA

On 24 August, **media sources** reported that one Government of Syria soldier was killed and 20 were wounded due to Turkish bombardment of Government of Syria positions in Tal Tamer near Al-Hasakeh. In addition, the SDF launched artillery shells against Turkish forces and Turkish-backed opposition factions in response to

Turkish shelling in al-Dardarah, outside Tal Tamer, leaving two people injured. Sources also reported renewed clashes on the front lines near Abu Rasin accompanied by bombardment by Turkish forces and their allies on several towns in Tal Tamer countryside. No casualties were recorded. On 25 August, **media sources** reported that Turkish forces and Turkish-backed opposition factions targeted several villages along the front lines with the SDF, west of Tell Abiad in northern Ar-Raqqa countryside.

The Syria map is unlikely to change soon

Tensions in northeast Syria are building along the front lines separating the Turkish-backed opposition from the SDF and Government of Syria (see: **Syria Update August 23, 2021**). Bombardment between the two sides has grown in intensity in recent weeks, mostly targeting the frontlines near Tal Tamer in the Al-Hasakeh countryside, with shelling extending to the eastern Aleppo countryside and northern Ar-Raqqa countryside. Turkish-backed opposition factions have stated they are responding to attacks and infiltration attempts carried out by the SDF, particularly in the Peace Spring area; the SDF denies this, claiming that its attacks constitute a legitimate response to opposition aggression. Some Turkish analysts maintain that the attacks do not augur a full-fledged military campaign, and are simply part of Turkey's strategy to target PKK leaders moving between northern Iraq and eastern Syria. Major troop mobilisations have yet to be seen; although conditions can change rapidly, northeast Syria is unlikely to undergo a dramatic shift in the near future. 🌐



Fatemiyoun Brigade Rumoured to Depart Syria, Redeploy in Afghanistan

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Since late July, rumours have swirled in Syria over the local fallout of the U.S. exit from Afghanistan. Naturally, many analysts have posed questions concerning the durability of U.S. support for clients elsewhere in the region, including Kurdish factions in Iraq and northeast Syria. To date, **the most specific claims** concern Afghan fighters who have deployed to frontlines in northwest Syria. On 24 July, Syrian local media **reported** that Iran would withdraw its Fatemiyoun Brigades — Shia refugees from Afghanistan who have been recruited and mobilised by Iran — to Afghanistan to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of U.S. forces, by the end of August. The Fatemiyoun Brigade is backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and has been fighting alongside Government forces in Syria since 2012.

America's regional shadow boxing

Recent developments in Afghanistan will have limited, if any, direct impact on the ground in Syria. The Beltway establishment has been fixated on the political ramifications of the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan. Some have speculated that a regional power

vacuum will open across the greater Middle East, buffeted by the harm seemingly done to American prestige and credibility. Claims such as these are dubious, and in all cases, they are unfalsifiable. Equally specious are claims within Syria that Afghan fighters mobilised by Iran are now being redeployed to Afghanistan. Such rumours have circulated widely since the Syria conflict settled into a stalemate in March 2020. However, foreign fighters from Pakistan and Lebanon are also believed to have begun demobilising, at least in part due to a slowdown in the conflict, not because of their urgent redeployment elsewhere. That said, current allegations concerning the Fatemiyoun have not been substantiated or wholly disproven. In the long term, Iran does have a foremost national interest in arranging favourable terms with the Taliban, although events in Afghanistan are unlikely to dramatically alter its approach to Syria in order to do so. ❄️



Explosion at HTS Base in Idleb Kills as Many as 9 Fighters

RAM HAMDAN, IDLEB GOVERNORATE

On 24 August, [media sources](#) reported that as many as 9 Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) fighters were killed and [15 were wounded](#) in an explosion at a military installation in Ram Hamdan

village in northern Idleb. There are conflicting reports regarding the cause of the deadly blast. There have been reports that a [U.S. drone](#) was spotted in the region around the time of the explosion, leading some to claim that the incident was the result of deliberate U.S. targeting. However, other reports and local sources indicate that the explosion occurred when a mortar shell was inadvertently triggered during a training exercise on the base.

Drill disaster

A U.S. strike targeting HTS fighters would constitute a major provocation against the former Al-Qaeda affiliate, particularly amid the group's efforts to pivot toward broader engagement with the West (see: [Syria Update 14 June 2021](#)). However, there is no evidence to substantiate this theory, and local sources and media reports have confirmed that the explosion was caused by a training accident. U.S. Syria policy lacks long-term direction; although HTS remains a proscribed group of primary concern and its interference is a chief impediment for aid implementers seeking to work in Idleb, the U.S. is unlikely to engage the group militarily as the Pentagon redirects its focus on peer competition with China. ❄️

>> 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.

Russian policy in the Middle East: Rebalancing

What Does It Say? The article argues that Russia has adopted a flexible policy in the Middle East that focuses on exporting security services, including groups with combat experience in Ukraine.

Reading Between the Lines: The model elsewhere in Russia’s Middle Eastern orbit: Syria has also become a recruiting ground for soldiers to be deployed to North Africa, where a similar mercenary model is in use.

Source: [Riddle](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [19 August 2021](#)

Dar’a Fragile Security Disrupted by Foreign Actors amid the Emergence of New Powers

What Does It Say? Southern Syria’s strategic location and importance in regional trade has caused many regional powers to seek to impose a presence in the area.

Reading Between the Lines: The area’s economic significance, particularly as a gateway to the Gulf states via the Nasib crossing, will likely continue to seed interest in it.

Source: [ORSAM](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [19 August 2021](#)

From Syria to Libya: Inside the booming drugs trade thriving on regional chaos

What Does It Say? Regional fragmentation and a security vacuum are being exploited by drug smuggling rings exporting and importing narcotics between Syria and Libya.

Reading Between the Lines: Syria’s narco-state status is unlikely to change, as it is enormously profitable for the Assad regime, and it is a critical economic lifeline amid its near-total isolation.

Source: [The New Arab](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [24 August 2021](#)

The journey of searching for Syrians who disappeared in Israeli hospitals

What Does It Say? Many Syrians who sought medical treatment in Israeli hospitals have not been heard from again, and searching for them has proved almost impossible.

Reading Between the Lines: The relationship between Israel and the Arab states makes searching for missing people from Syria a particularly sensitive issue. The story complicates the simple narrative of support provided through Israel during the early stages of the conflict.

Source: [Daraj](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [23 August 2021](#)

Authorities in Syria Make Billions Arresting Foreign Currency Merchants

What Does It Say? The Syrian authorities in the city of Hama have launched an arrest campaign against money changers and merchants dealing in foreign currency. The article details how the Syrian Government has reaped billions as a result.

Reading Between the Lines: This is not the first time that the Syrian Government has undertaken such a scheme, justifying arrests as a simple rule of law measure. In reality, the laws are designed to benefit the regime at the expense of the citizens.

Source: [The Syrian Observer](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [25 August 2021](#)

Syria's Electricity Sector After a Decade of War: A Comprehensive Assessment

What Does It Say? The article from COAR's WPCS partners at EUI presents a comprehensive assessment of Syria's deteriorating electricity situation and argues that the main obstacle to repairing the sector is financial.

Reading Between the Lines: Sanctions, regional politics, and warfare have made securing the funds to repair the power grid in Syria a seemingly herculean task. Although outside assistance is needed to move the needle many donors remain leery of engaging the sector, due to fears of approaching reconstruction.

Source: [Middle East Directions](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [30 July 2021](#)

The Taliban awakens anti-HTS groups in Idleb

What Does It Say? The article details how groups in Idleb that are opposed to HTS have been celebrating the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan.

Reading Between the Lines: Some of these groups have been galvanised by the Taliban's momentum, and will likely oppose HTS again. While many analysts have overstated the impact of developments in Afghanistan on the greater Middle East, the events may nonetheless prompt reprioritisation of objectives among Islamist groups elsewhere, including in Syria.

Source: [Syria TV](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [20 August 2021](#)

Kheder Khaddour: Currently, Decentralization is Not Realistic in Syria

What Does It Say? In the interview, Khaddour argues that the type of administrative decentralisation that many call for in Syria is unrealistic, while the country currently operates in a canton model.

Reading Between the Lines: Administrative decentralisation is among the most frequently used buzzwords of the Syria conflict. Experience suggests that any form of government decentralisation will ultimately leave power in the hands of Damascus and its agents. International actors must be careful what they wish for: although decentralisation remains a commonly proposed model for Syria's future, it is not a panacea.

Source: [The Syrian Observer](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [26 August 2021](#)

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