

Syria Update

1 November 2021 | Vol. 4 | No. 42

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WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST

The following is a brief synopsis of the *In-Depth Analysis* section:

On 25 October, violent clashes erupted in western Idlib and the northern Lattakia countryside between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Jund al-Sham and Jund Allah, two smaller jihadi factions composed primarily of foreign fighters. While HTS's aggressive behaviour against other factions may be driven by Turkish pressure, it can also be seen as an extension of the group's continuing bid for unchecked dominance over the region. More importantly, it comes amid growing speculation that Turkey will launch another military offensive in northern Syria.

The following is a brief synopsis of the *Whole-of-Syria Review*:

- 01 The sixth session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee ended with little progress and 'big disappointment' in Geneva. Not for the first time, the Government of Syria's obstructionism sent the delegations home disappointed.
- 02 Western Union's Syrian agent, Al Fuad Exchange, has resumed its services in Syria following a brief, unexplained suspension. The issue was likely brought on by exchange rate issues, a problem that now vexes donors concerned by the value of their money in Syria.
- 03 At least 15 cases of a rare, deadly fungal infection have been confirmed in Damascus, Lattakia, and northwest Syria throughout October. Although the infection is non-contagious, the uptick in cases highlights the residual impacts of conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, while early detection systems remain inadequate.
- 04 On 21 October, the Government of Syria announced it had executed 24 people convicted of starting wildfires on the Syrian coast in 2020. Though shrouded in uncertainty, the sentences are intended to contain popular outrage and deter similar activities in the future.
- 05 Several drone attacks across Syria highlight the continuing use and growing utility of unmanned aircraft in the conflict. Crucially, drones have also been used in cross-border drug smuggling operations, pointing to the wide accessibility of such technology for state and non-state actors alike.

01

GENEVA

Pedersen: Sixth Constitutional Committee Session a 'Big Disappointment'

02

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Remittances in the Spotlight as Western Union Reopens after a Brief Suspension

03

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Rare Fungal Infection Confirmed in Several Areas of Syria

04

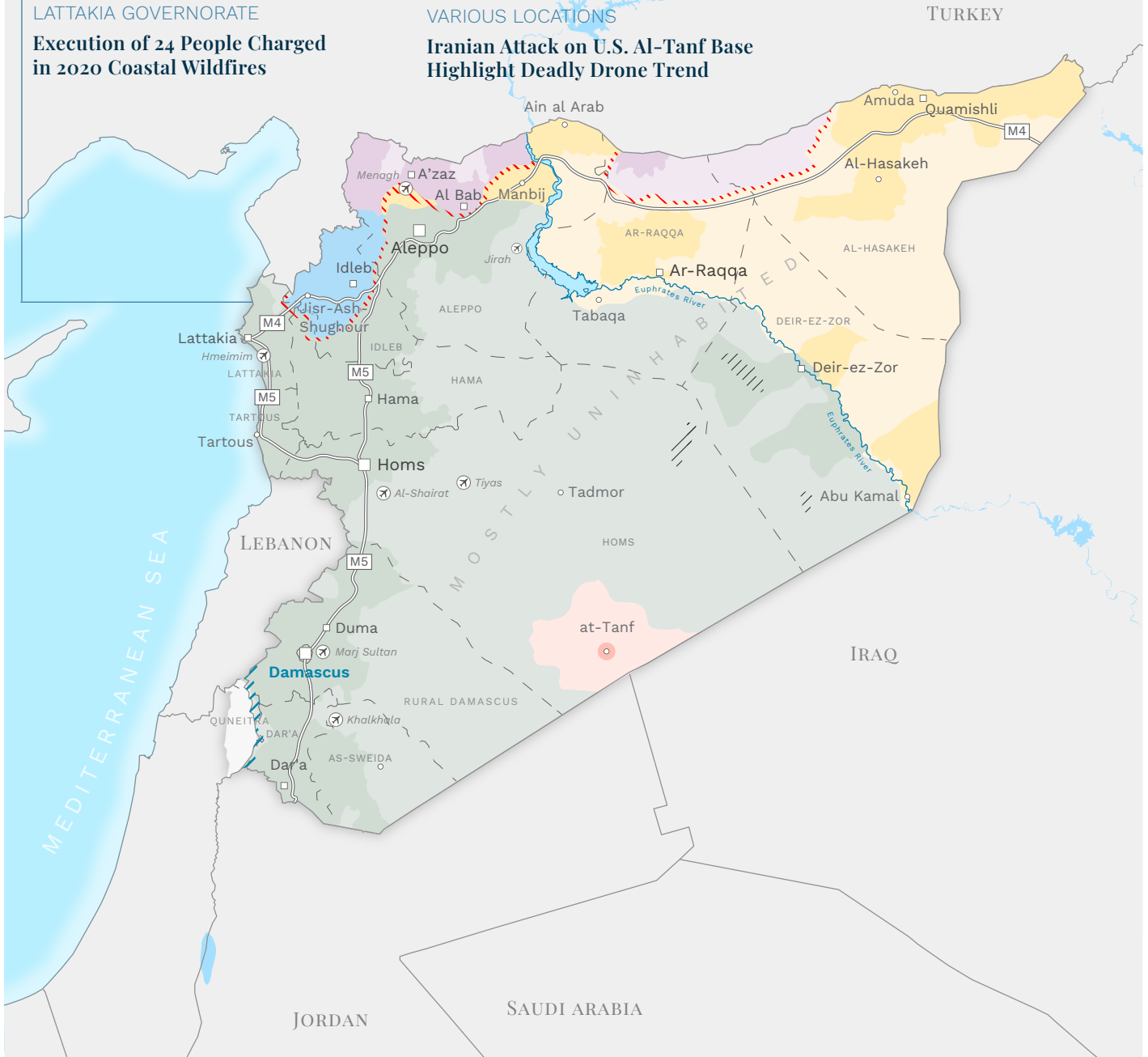
LATTAKIA GOVERNORATE

Execution of 24 People Charged in 2020 Coastal Wildfires

05

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Iranian Attack on U.S. Al-Tanf Base Highlight Deadly Drone Trend



Population Density

- Major city (750.000+)
- City (100.000+)
- Town (25.000+)
- Governorate
- Military airbase

100 km

Territorial Control

- LOW POPULATION DENSITY
- Government of Syria
 - Syrian Democratic Forces
 - Syrian National Army
 - U.S.-Backed Opposition Groups
 - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
 - Islamic State presence
 - Contested area
 - UN Disengagement Observer Force

Type Of Incident

- Humanitarian Issues
- Social
- Regional Intervention
- Security
- Economy
- Governance

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

On 25 October, violent clashes erupted in western Idleb and the northern Lattakia countryside between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Jund al-Sham and Jund Allah, two smaller jihadi factions composed primarily of foreign fighters. One day later, under pressure, Jund al-Sham leader Muslim al-Shishani agreed to a deal with HTS that allowed him and 70 of his fighters to vacate their strongholds in the Turkman mountain. On 27 October, HTS and Jund Allah reached a ceasefire, exchanging captives and allowing Jund Allah to evacuate its positions and relocate, according to contested reports, to Afrin. These confrontations were relatively modest in scale, yet they come at an especially sensitive time for northwest Syria. Warning signs from Turkey already suggest that Syria's northern frontier may be slowly teetering toward yet another major military offensive, as Russia and Turkey jockey for power. The clashes have only fueled speculation over those back-room dealings and, in particular, Turkey's relations with HTS.

What sparked the fighting?

Why tensions between the groups have boiled over is unclear. The developments follow months of slow-burn infighting among groups in the HTS-dominated northwest and, in that sense, are nothing new. For their part, HTS officials have accused the Chechen group Jund al-Sham of harbouring criminals wanted by the Salvation Government's judiciary. Similarly, they charge the Azerbaijani-dominated Jund Allah with holding a takfiri ideology more retrograde than that of Islamic State (IS), which had refused to accept Jund Allah within its fold. Opponents of HTS, including independent and al-Qaeda aligned groups, view the matter differently. They contend that HTS has finally bowed to Turkish pressure to dismantle radical groups in Idleb, as per Ankara's commitments under the Sochi and Astana agreements. Moscow has frequently cited the presence of radical groups in Idleb (among which it includes HTS) as justification for its military activities there. It is notable that the strategic M4 highway, the foremost objective for Damascus and Moscow in northwest Syria, is close to the Turkman mountain. Clearing the area of independent factions may make it easier for the region to change hands in the case of a wider deal between Ankara and Moscow.

Ankara is not alone in driving the events, however. HTS has ample reasons of its own for seeking to eliminate local challengers. Cracking down on rival factions, particularly those with large foreign contingents, accelerates the group's

long-running search for political rehabilitation. Facing an existential challenge over its relations to outside powers, the group continues to rebrand itself not as an enemy of the international community, but as an effective 'partner' in the global war on terror (see: [Syria Update 14 June 2021](#)). Since its ideological divorce from al-Qaeda in 2016, HTS has detained and killed dozens of commanders and fighters affiliated with IS, al-Qaeda-aligned Hurras al-Din, and other like-minded groups. Cracking down on terrorist-designated factions and figures may be a sign of goodwill that also serves HTS's own local interests.

The widening gyre

For actors within the aid response, these events will naturally be read as potential indicators amid the heightened speculation over a potential military intervention by Turkey (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Turkey's bellicose rhetoric has escalated in recent weeks, and both Ankara and Damascus have deployed military reinforcements to sensitive frontline areas in northwest Syria, in Idleb and Tell Rifaat, respectively. Meanwhile, Russia has reportedly sent advanced aircraft to Quamishli, where it maintains an important military airbase (see: [Syria Update 13-19 November 2019](#)). Some view the presence of the aircraft as an indication of Russian preparations for coming military action in northern Syria.

All told, crisis response actors find themselves in an uncomfortable, but familiar, position. Warning signs of a potential military intervention by Turkey in northern Syria are mounting. Whether in Tell Rifaat or strategic communities in northeast Syria, such an action would likely coincide with a Russian offensive in southern Idleb, which is already witnessing instability due to armed group infighting. Months of airstrikes in Idleb demonstrate the Government of Syria's continued resolve to recapture opposition-held territory. A further breakdown of a relatively calm status quo that has persisted since March 2020 is distinctly possible. Implementers should prepare accordingly. Up-to-date security plans are needed, especially in frontline and strategically valuable areas. Contingency planning is also important, and pre-positioning should be considered. In the event that offensives are launched, large-scale displacement will likely follow established patterns. In Idleb, border regions with Turkey have routinely been beset by large numbers of IDPs from frontline communities in the governorate's southern regions. In the past, military offensives along northeast Syria's border with Turkey have prompted flight to areas like Ar-Raqqa city and Iraqi Kurdistan.

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 GENEVA

Pedersen: Sixth Constitutional Committee Session a ‘Big Disappointment’

On 17 October, the [Syrian Constitution Committee](#) met for its sixth round of talks in Geneva. UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen described the session – the first since January 2021 – as “a big disappointment” – particularly after early optimism over the possibility of a modest procedural breakthrough. Over the course of the four-day session, blocs representing the Syrian opposition, the Government of Syria, and civil society [presented draft constitutional texts](#) on select “titles”. The Syrian Government committee recommended principles on “the territorial independence of the Syrian Arab Republic” as well as on extremism and terrorism; the opposition bloc submitted language on “the army, armed forces, and security and intelligence”; and the civil society bloc submitted a text on the rule of law. However, without an agreed mechanism to discuss, revise, and adopt the texts, the Government bloc declared a lack of “common ground,” and refused to present comments or suggest revisions. According to Pedersen, the final day of the session “concluded without any points of consensus.” The parties were likewise unable to set a date for future talks.

Small steps, no giant leaps

Damascus is largely, but not exclusively, to blame for the glacial pace of the committee’s work thus far. Without the internal divisions produced by competing interests among factions within the other blocs, Damascus has succeeded in stalling the work through its one-step-forward, two-steps-backward approach in Geneva. Although progress has been made, for instance on draft provisions of principles, the Government bloc’s tactics of blocking logical, necessary next steps are by now familiar. The committee was established by the United Nations and had its first round of talks in 2019; since then, hopes of drafting an inclusive, revised constitution for Syria have largely fallen by the wayside (see: [Syria Constitutional Committee: Preliminary Background Note](#)). The [committee consists](#) of 150 members equally distributed into three blocs: the Syrian Government, the opposition, and civil society advocates. The constitutional committee will continue on this path unless Damascus changes its approach, a decidedly unlikely prospect until it is fully secure in its primary conflict objectives.



02 VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Remittances in the Spotlight as Western Union Reopens after a Brief Suspension

On 26 October, [media sources](#) reported that Western Union’s official agent in Syria, Al Fuad Exchange, would resume operating in the country after suspending its services days earlier. The resumption came on the condition that remittances to Syria be capped at 1,000 USD per transfer. The company has not yet publicly commented on the reason behind the suspension. Its operations reportedly resumed due to the volume of complaints by Syrians abroad whose relatives inside Syria are reliant on remittances to weather bracing economic conditions.

Reliant on remittances

Alongside foreign aid, remittances are among the most important pillars of household economic resilience in Syria. As such the suspension of Western Union operations in the country would have dramatically undercut struggling Syrian families, a daunting prospect on the verge of winter. There are several lines of speculation surrounding the brief suspension of services. Some speculate, without much basis, that the company was attempting to protect beneficiaries’ information from the Syrian Government, due to data collection that put them at risk of arrest. It has also been suggested that the transfers were suspended due to sanctions fear raised over a renewed focus on disadvantageous exchange rates. Currently, the [official remittance rate](#) in Syria is 2,500 SYP/USD, although Al Fuad Exchange reportedly remitted funds to Syria at a more favourable rate, 2,800 SYP/USD. However, the market rate stands at roughly 3,500 SYP/USD, and the difference between these rates is lost on conversion. While the remittance rate is established separately from that used in humanitarian activities, similar structural issues are at play. Speculation that the sanctioned Central Bank of Syria profits from the lost funding has already prompted introspection within the UN and among donor governments that send funding to Syria for aid operations. Such issues require full transparency. While domestic banking regulations and procedures in Syria fall outside the reach of donor advocacy, the international community should rally support where it is likely to be most effective: improved exchange rates that will prevent such loss from the outset.



03 VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Rare Fungal Infection Confirmed in Several Areas of Syria

Cases of a rare but dangerous fungal infection, mucormycosis, have been on the rise in October throughout Syria. At least 15 cases have been confirmed so far, including six in Lattakia in the last three weeks and four in northwest Syria in early October. Previously, Syria reportedly averaged about three cases annually. Mucormycosis is a noncontagious infection caused by a fungus that occurs naturally in decaying organic matter including soil and trash, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Infection poses particular risks for immunocompromised people, including people living with HIV and those who have recovered from COVID-19. Early detection is crucial; the survival rate is approximately 50 percent, and symptoms vary depending on the mode of infection. Treatment typically requires an intensive combination of surgery and antifungal therapy. While case rates remain relatively low, news of the infection has sparked fear among Syrians still reeling from the pandemic.

Pandemic amnesia

The uptick in cases is thought to be an indirect consequence of the lacklustre pandemic response, as the absence of a coordinated public health approach has led to high rates of undetected infection. Adding to the concern, Syria has a poor track record for responding to disease outbreaks. Early warning and detection systems to identify and control the spread of illness are largely lacking from Syria's public health sector, despite coordination with international health agencies such as the WHO (see: [Syrian Public Health after COVID-19: Entry Points and Lessons Learned from the Pandemic Response](#)). Since the conflict began, public health in Syria has increasingly been coloured by a breakdown in state services and economic deterioration. In the current case, poor waste management practices could exacerbate underlying conditions permitting the growth of the mucormycosis fungus. Large numbers of people with weakened immune

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systems due to COVID infection may increase baseline risks, while steep medical costs deter people from proactively seeking medical attention, making early detection of high-risk infections difficult.

Early detection systems, as well as flexible mechanisms to mobilise support in the wake of an infectious outbreak are increasingly crucial given Syria's current public health conditions. Aid actors throughout Syria would be well-placed to support these capabilities, and to take steps to ensure that the medical facilities they support have sound infection prevention protocols. Aside from direct medical support, fear around the spread of the fungus points to the need for communication and awareness efforts from locally trusted aid programmes, physically and across social media, in order to answer questions about the fungus and to avoid the spread of misinformation.



04 LATTAKIA GOVERNORATE

Execution of 24 People Charged in 2020 Coastal Wildfires

On 21 October, the Government of Syria Ministry of Justice announced that it had executed 24 people charged with igniting wildfires on the Syrian coast in the summer of 2020 (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2020](#)). In addition, 11 people received life sentences of hard labour, and five minors were sentenced to 10-12 years of labour. According to the ministry, charges were handed down based on Counter-Terrorism Law no. 19 (2012), which classifies sabotaging public facilities as a terrorist act. The law also allows the Government to confiscate the assets of the accused. Feras Fares, the head of the Lawyers' Association, described asset seizure as a necessity to compensate those who were affected by the blazes. On 17 December 2020, the Government of Syria announced the arrest of 39 people, who subsequently confessed on state television that they had ignited the fires, which raged across Lattakia, Tartous, and Homs, for unclear economic reasons. According to media reports, most of the arrestees were from Beit Fares in Lattakia Governorate, which has been under opposition control since 2016.

Miscarriage of justice

The prosecutions are a show of force that may be intended as a deterrent and to blunt popular outrage in fire-affected coastal communities, where the Government's weak re-

sponse disappointed loyalists (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2020](#)). Syria's ruling elite went on a failed public relations blitz to calm tensions in coastal areas ruined by the fires. The Latakia governor pledged 10 million SYP (then approximately \$4,300) in aid to each affected village, with an additional 500 million SYP (\$215,000) in interest-free loans for agriculturalists. Bashar al-Assad personally toured the region, and businessman Rami Makhlouf pledged donations from his company, Syriatel, yet Damascus' gladhanding did not make up for the miserly support promised.

Human rights and international bodies (including the [European Union](#)) have condemned the executions. Others have [cast doubts](#) on the integrity of the investigation and prosecution processes. It is worth noting that the ministry did not reveal the names of the convicts, their affiliations, or details of the execution proceedings. Skeptics [have raised doubts](#) as to whether the executions were carried out at all, raising further questions over public messaging surrounding the Government of Syria's politicised response to the fires. Looking ahead, their sentencing prompts concern around the Syrian judicial system itself, especially given the lack of transparency. While Syria's counter-terror laws have long been seen as instruments for pursuing political opponents, their importance will rise in a post-conflict setting, where justice and legal accountability will be all but impossible without transparency and credible legal mechanisms.



05 VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Iranian Attack on U.S. Al-Tanf Base Highlight Deadly Drone Trend

On 21 October, Syrian media reported that a Turkish drone [attack had killed](#) the head of the Autonomous Administration's Social Justice Council in Ain al-Arab (Kobani), the latest in a series of provocative lethal drone operations in Syria. On 22 October, U.S. Central Command [announced](#) that it had killed Abdel Hamid Matar, a leader of the al-Qaeda loyalist group Hurras al-Din, in a drone strike in the vicinity of Suluk in northwest Syria. The incident followed a coordinated attack involving drones that was launched on U.S. troops stationed at al-Tanf base in southeast Syria (see: [Syria Update 25 October 2021](#)). Iranian forces have been [credited](#) with the Tanf attack, which may be retaliation for the targeting of its forces near Tadmor (Palmyra) in central Syria.

If reports on Iran's involvement in the Tanf base attack are true, the event would be the first confirmed, direct Iranian attack on U.S. forces in Syria. If so, it may open a new front in the conflict. Tehran may seek to exert pressure on Washington amid ongoing talks over Iran's nuclear program, a priority issue for the current U.S. administration.

'New' wars, new tools

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Crucially, not all drone activities in Syria are military in nature. On 21 October, Jordanian armed forces condemned an attempt to smuggle drugs across the Syria-Jordan border using drones. Local sources note that this is not the first time cross-border smugglers have used drones to reach Jordan. The incident draws attention to the prospect that malign actors will turn to drones for illicit economic activity, too.

OPEN SOURCE ANNEX

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.

Bananas Cause Problems for Syrians in Turkey

What does it say? In a television interview, a Turkish national complained that Syrians could afford to buy many kilograms of bananas while Turks could not. Syrians residing in Turkey responded by mocking the interview on social media, prompting a decision by the Turkish government to deport seven Syrian nationals.

Reading between the lines: This is not the first time the Turkish Government has taken a heavy-handed approach toward Syrians residing in Turkey, and such actions are likely to escalate in the months leading up to the general elections in 2023.

Source: 7al.net
Language: Arabic
Date: 22 October 2021

A New Alliance for Syria in Washington. What Are Its Goals and What Will It Offer Syrians?

What does it say? Nine Syrian organisations operating in the U.S. have announced the formation of the ‘American Alliance for Syria,’ which aims to coordinate communication with constituents and outreach efforts with lawmakers in Washington D.C.

Reading between the lines: The member organisations have a long history of engagement in D.C. Several of them played a key role in advocating the passing of the Caesar Act, but they will face long odds of creating significant political pressure, given the lack of a politically significant Syrian constituency in Congress.

Source: Syria.tv
Language: Arabic
Date: 26 October 2021

Jamil Bayek: We Cannot Be Against Assad and Have Never Severed Our Relationship with Damascus

What does it say? In a recent interview, Jamil Bayek, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), discussed the organisation’s historical and continued relationship with the Assad regime.

Reading between the lines: The PKK’s historical relationship with Damascus is well known, but the interview comes at a time when Turkish political leaders are building a case for another military intervention in northern Syria, in part to quash PKK-linked forces which they say pose a continuing threat to Turkey.

Source: Yekiti Media
Language: Arabic
Date: 26 October 2021

Israeli Gas to Syria and Lebanon Through the Arab Pipeline, and the Target Is Iran

What does it say? The article highlights Israel's role in recent deals to supply Egyptian gas to Lebanon via Syria, and Israeli motivations to utilise the deal to push back against Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon.

Reading between the lines: Recent developments around the Arab Pipeline in the Levant are undoubtedly linked to broader geostrategic interests; however, Damascus's willingness to accommodate Israel's political interests should not be overstated.

Source: [al-Sharq al-Awsat](#)
Language: Arabic
Date: 27 October 2021

Syrian War Crimes on Trial in Germany: Will Justice Be Lost in Translation?

What does it say? Trials for war crimes in Syria have become increasingly disconnected from the Syrian victims involved, with justice limited to the German court system and communication primarily in German.

Reading between the lines: The article provides one example of how Syrian accountability has been increasingly externalised in recent years, both as a product of the conflict and as Syrian activist groups have been pulled further into the diaspora.

Source: [The New Humanitarian](#)
Language: English
Date: 21 October 2021

Manipulating National Trauma: The Assad Regime's Wartime Instrumentalisation of Presidential Amnesties

What does it say? Amnesties issued by the Syrian Government over the years have never been about fostering goodwill or granting true concessions, but instead were employed in the service of the Assad regime's survival.

Reading between the lines: Understanding the Syrian Government's use of amnesties as a political and strategic tool is important for assessing where international pressure can — and cannot — progress the detention file in Syria.

Source: [European University Institute](#)
Language: English
Date: October 2021

Aleppo's Damaged Homes. Demolish or Sell to Qaterji, Khader

What does it say? Damaged and repaired homes in Aleppo are being demolished to make way for new housing developments led by two prominent, internationally sanctioned businessmen, Hussam al-Qaterji and Abu Ali Khader.

Reading between the lines: Violations to housing, land, and property rights (HLP) represent the most recent manifestation of violence against communities in Syria. While international sanctions and HLP advocacy cannot produce the necessary localised accountability for such cases, aid practitioners can do more to assess and gauge the risks of HLP violations through their own programmes and partnerships.

Source: [Enab Baladi](#)
Language: Arabic
Date: 17 October 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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