

Syria Update

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Southern Syria without Russia? Oudeh Returns Amid Dar'a Shakeup

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW

Report: Russia Makes an Offer to Syria's Kurds Amid Turkish Threats

Moscow seeks to capitalize on pressure to bring the Autonomous Administration back into line with Damascus Pg 5

Damascus Raises Prices of Electricity and Cooking Gas

The news will likely spark price increases for local products and services Pg 5

Gulf States Ice out Lebanon. Is Their Aid to Syrian Refugees Next?

Beirut is a political football in the Gulf states' wider regional jockeying Pg 6

Turkey Opens Border for Syrians Seeking Medical Care, Following Suspension

The reports are unsubstantiated on the ground Pg 6

Reports Claim Turkey Stops Deploying Syrian Fighters in Libya

The reports are unsubstantiated on the ground Pg 7

People's Tribunal' in The Hague Sets Its Sights on Syria Accountability

The consortium will build a legal case against the Syrian Government, but has no legal force Pg 7

The Syrian Foreign Minister visits Dar'a, yet another sign of Damascus's growing comfort with its increasingly direct control in the region. Image courtesy of Enab Baladi.



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WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST

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

The Government of Syria has relieved Hussam Louka of his role at the head of the Security Committee, an ad-hoc group that is largely responsible for top-level affairs in southern Syria. Louka steps aside after a big summer in southern Syria. The Government of Syria has upped its presence, disarmed former rebels, and perhaps most critically, dismantled the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade, folding many of its fighters into its chain of command through the Military Intelligence service. Curiously, the Eighth Brigade's commander, Ahmad Oudeh, has also returned to Syria, following months abroad. Together, the developments signal a change in the trajectory of the south. As Damascus steps in, Russia is stepping back. Aid actors should be aware that operational space will change as the security environment in the region evolves.

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

- 01 Kurdish media have reported the details of a September meeting with Kurdish and Russian political officials. Moscow reportedly offered a four-point deal which would bring the Autonomous Administration further in line with Damascus, without accepting points suggested by the Kurdish delegation. Pressure for the Kurds to strike a deal will grow as the threat of a renewed Turkish incursion grows.
- 02 On 2 November, the Government of Syria more than doubled prices for electricity and cooking gas. The decision will likely increase prices of local products and services, but does more to divert attention from supply-side issues which increasingly limit the Government's ability to provide electricity and fuel to residents.
- 03 Gulf states have banned Lebanese imports and expelled Lebanese officials in response to critical statements made by Lebanon's Information Minister. Gulf aid — a lifeline for Syrians in Lebanon — is at risk if the spat worsens.
- 04 Turkey has reportedly resumed procedures to allow Syrians to travel to Turkey for advanced medical care, after weeks of a mysterious stoppage. Donors should note that only by building resilience in Syria itself can they mitigate the risk of such service interruptions.
- 05 Reports have circulated widely claiming that Turkey is withdrawing Syrian mercenaries from Libya. There are no signs that such a draw-down is yet underway. Donors should note that even if military conditions change, war economy linkages and migration pathways linking the countries will be stubbornly persistent.
- 06 On 2 November, a consortium of press freedom organisations launched an informal tribunal in The Hague to investigate crimes, including in Syria. The proceedings have no legal force, but are emblematic of the growing importance of ad-hoc accountability mechanisms in the absence of formal legal procedures for Syria.

01  

MOSCOW

Report: Russia Makes an Offer to Syria's Kurds Amid Turkish Threats

06  

THE HAGUE

'People's Tribunal' in The Hague Sets Its Sights on Syria Accountability

05 

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Reports Claim Turkey Stops Deploying Syrian Fighters in Libya

04  

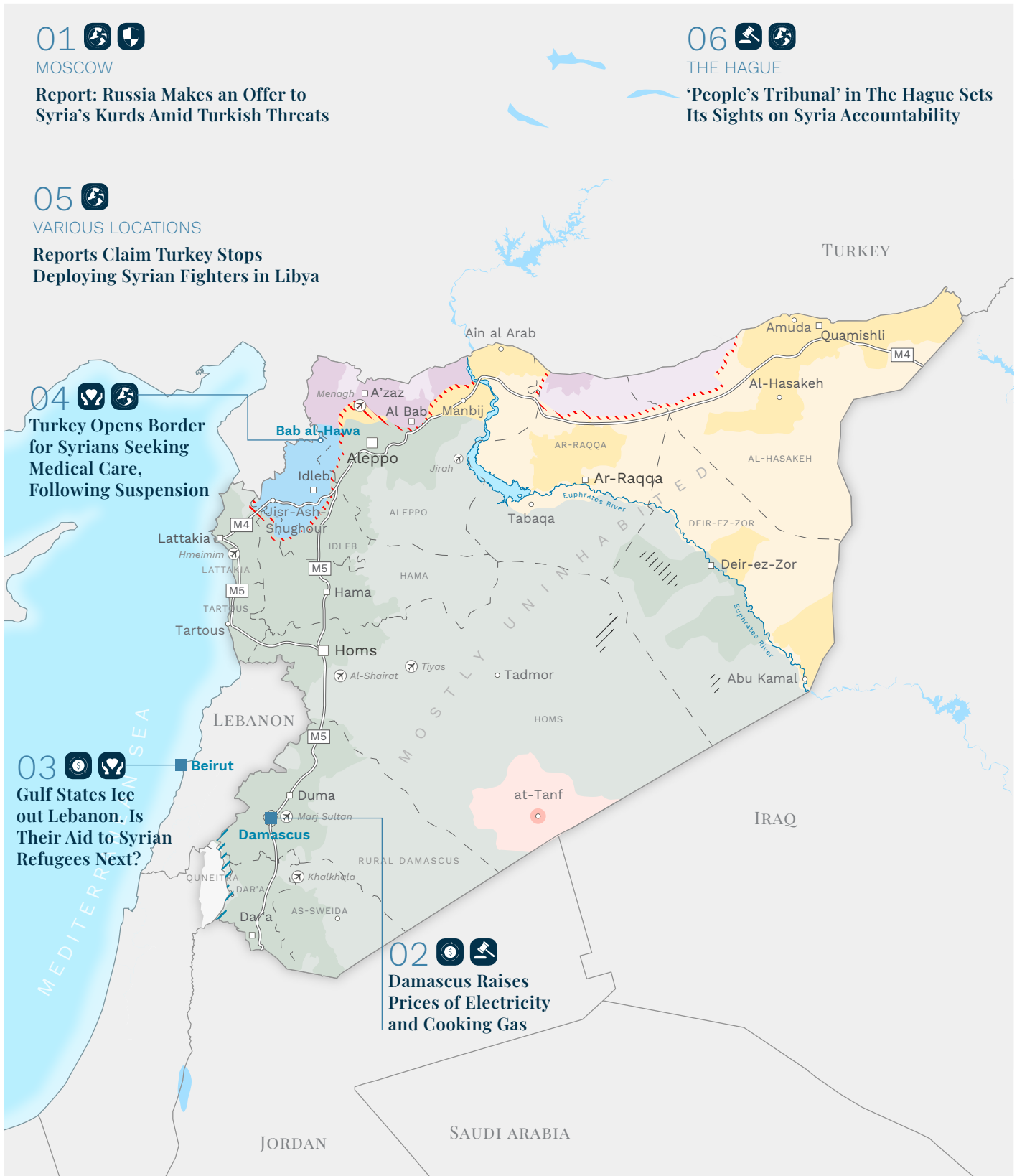
Turkey Opens Border for Syrians Seeking Medical Care, Following Suspension

03  




Gulf States Ice out Lebanon. Is Their Aid to Syrian Refugees Next?



02  


Damascus Raises Prices of Electricity and Cooking Gas



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 2 November, media and local sources reported that the Government of Syria has removed Major General Hussam Louka, Director of Syrian Intelligence, from his post as the head of the Security Committee responsible for southern Syria. Major General Mufid Hassan, commander of the First Corps, has been installed as chairman of the committee, which is charged with handling the most sensitive files in the south, including ongoing reconciliation proceedings negotiated under military pressure. Damascus's decision to change horses in midstream is not the only shakeup in southern Syria. Local sources report that Ahmad Oudeh, a former rebel commander and the leader of the Russian-affiliated Eighth Brigade, has returned to Syria, after leaving the country and watching on from abroad as the forces under his nominal command were systematically dismantled and its fighters were co-opted by the Government of Syria. Hassan's appointment and Oudeh's return are signposts that southern Syria has changed. Implementers and aid donors should be aware of evolving operational space as Russia cedes its direct lines of authority to the Government of Syria security apparatus following the major security developments that took place over the summer.

What has Louka achieved?

Hussam Louka's departure comes after a series of major victories for Damascus over the course of the summer. After some three years of quasi-autonomy for the region, Louka was able to stamp out organised resistance in major insurgent hotspots, force the handover of cached personal weapons, impose tighter security restrictions, install checkpoints, and most importantly, secure new reconciliation deals in communities across Dar'a Governorate (see: [Syria Update 2 August 2021](#)). Although the scale of its presence is debated, Damascus undoubtedly has won greater scope to coerce one-time rebels and punish acts of resistance. Of course, all these gains were achieved through the threat of force, illustrated by the partial siege of Dar'a al-Balad. These efforts were implicitly backed by Russia, which both tempered its support for former rebels and pressured them to agree to terms via the Central Negotiations Committee, which parlayed with the Government's Security Committee. No reason for Louka's departure has been given, but local sources indicate Louka has been relieved of the responsibility after years of ill health, which has reportedly forced him to travel abroad seeking medical treatment.

Russia has facilitated these developments, including through its partial abandonment of the Eighth Brigade, the main vehicle by which Moscow has exerted influence on southern Syria. In mid-October, the Government of Syria began to systematically dismantle Eighth Brigade units across the eastern Dar'a countryside (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Fighters have largely been integrated into the Syrian Government military command. Alongside the control assumed by Syrian Military Intelligence across communities, the development represents a nearly wholesale shift in se-

curity authority in communities across the south. Eighth Brigade fighters who once looked to Russia as a guarantor of their interests must now answer to Damascus directly. Only in Busra al-Sham will the Eighth Brigade remain active, and Ahmad Oudeh returns to Syria from Jordan to lead a rump force that has dramatically circumscribed force and reach. The contours of its evolving relationship with Damascus and Moscow are yet to be seen.

Where does southern Syria go from here?

To an extent, Russia has abandoned some of its former military partners in southern Syria, placing them under the control of Damascus. In that respect, the developments repudiate a scheme laid out in 2018, when Russia executed a reconciliation strategy that allowed major armed opposition groups to avoid 'hard' reconciliation deals with Damascus by cosy-ing up to Moscow instead. Hundreds of fighters who sought Russian protection in this way now find themselves looking to Damascus. Although Moscow probably never intended to maintain direct control over such groups in perpetuity, it is unlikely that Russian commanders sought to fold them into Damascus's command under such circumstances.

Russia's new plan for southern Syria is not immediately clear. Its willingness to cede direct command to the Government of Syria comes as the relationship between Damascus and Amman is evolving, with partially at its bidding (see: [Syria Update 30 August 2021](#)). Jordan has its own reasons for seeking ties in Damascus, and has struck an increasingly pragmatic posture toward Syria, as officials have prioritised stability on their northern border in talks with the Government of Syria. The summer's military flareups in southern Syria notably stymied Jordan's hopes of revived cross-border trade. Meanwhile, Damascus and Russia have emphasised the persistence of issues such as drug spillover and Iranian influence to cow Jordan into greater cooperation with Syria.

Aid actors will face an uncertain future in the south. Although the Government of Syria has declared the south stable and secure, it will be anything but. In actual fact, the security situation and implementation environment are unlikely to differ radically from their status over recent years. Reconciliation and infiltration will only change the terms and tenor of defiance, but the drivers of resistance — poor services, conscription, and detainees — continue to go unaddressed. As such, assassinations, anonymous attacks, and open tensions between communities and the Syrian Government will persist. Operationally, split control of the south has been a major complicating factor for aid implementation. Security approvals granted by top-level authorities have not always been honoured by security actors on the ground. More unified control under the rule of Damascus may ease such issues, but other concerns may spring up in their place. Military Intelligence personnel will endeavour to carve out small fiefdoms, and war economy competition is likely to go on unabated. Aid actors should be vigilant as a new balance of power for the region sets in.

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 MOSCOW

Report: Russia Makes an Offer to Syria's Kurds Amid Turkish Threats

On 1 November, Kurdish media for the first time published details concerning a 15 September meeting in Moscow between northeast Syria political leadership and Russian officials, apparently part of a Russian bid to extract political concessions in the face of growing threats of a Turkish military incursion into northern Syria. During the meeting, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov reportedly made a four-point offer to the President of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), Ilham Ahmed. The deal stipulated:

1. Raising the Syrian flag in Autonomous Administration areas;
2. Giving Damascus 75 percent of total oil revenues in the region;
3. Acknowledging that Bashar al-Assad will remain in power; and
4. Accepting decentralisation as per the Government of Syria's Law 107.

Reportedly, Ahmed requested the addition of two points:

1. Acknowledging the rights of the Kurdish people
2. Recognition of the special status of the SDF and affiliated Assayish security forces.

The Russian delegation reportedly expressed willingness to continue discussions without accepting Ahmed additional points.

The lesser of two evils?

Russia has capitalised on Turkish military operations to extract concessions from Kurdish political leadership in the past, and escalating Turkish threats may well push the group closer to Damascus and Russia. Previous Turkish-led military operations in the region resulted in increased presence of Russian Forces in Autonomous Administration territories, while U.S. troops are concentrated further to the east and south. However, uncertainty is high regarding whether U.S. or Russian troops will (or even could) act to prevent a Turkish incursion. In 2019, under then-President Trump, U.S. forces withdrew from border areas, clearing the way for the Turkish advance. Looking ahead, Russia remains keen to re-establish Government of Syria control over northeast Syria, and the terms of its reported proposal differ little from likely

models of reintegration that have been discussed since the Peace Spring Operation in 2019 (see: [Potential Models of Governance in Northeast Syria](#)). While it is difficult to judge the proposals, they do show the degree to which the sides are in broad alignment over the region's future relationship with Damascus. It should be noted that a fifth military operation by Turkey would have an immense humanitarian impact, potentially displacing hundreds of thousands of people toward the urban centers to the south of the region (see: [Syria Update October 19, 2021](#)).



02 DAMASCUS

Damascus Raises Prices of Electricity and Cooking Gas

On 2 November, the Government of Syria announced a round of price increases for electricity and cooking gas in Government-controlled areas. A 10 kilogram cylinder of cooking gas increased from 3,800 SYP (approx. 1.08 USD) to 9,700 (approx. 2.75 USD) on the smart card system, a price which reportedly represents one-third of the cost incurred by the state itself. Meanwhile, electricity costs have been doubled for households and nearly quadrupled for the agricultural sector, rising from 12 SYP per kilowatt hour (KW) to 40 SYP/KW. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection cited rising costs to the state in the decision, contending that it would raise consumer rates to avoid cutting access directly. The news also came alongside a decision on 3 November to eliminate access to ration cards and state-subsidised purchases for 800,000 Syrians earning high wages in the private sector. At the time of writing, it is not clear what criteria will be used to determine eligibility.

Distracting from dysfunction

The decisions all but guarantees another cold winter ahead, a reality which Syrian officials have already openly acknowledged amid fuel shortages (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Increasing prices will inevitably limit access to services the Syrian Government is increasingly hard-pressed to supply. Impacts will vary by sector. The price hike will make small-scale farming activities less tenable, and low-income households in particular will struggle to absorb the rising costs, potentially reducing demand for electricity. The decision to bar affluent Syrians from the smart card system, on the other hand, is unlikely to create major implications, given the system's long wait times and limited implementation which already push many people to buy goods at cost on the

open market. Aid actors should prepare for the multileveled impacts of the price increases, namely on residents' access to related electricity-dependent services such as water, and the possibility for reduced output of local production and agriculture.



03 BEIRUT

Gulf States Ice out Lebanon. Is Their Aid to Syrian Refugees Next?

On 29 October, [Saudi Arabia banned](#) all Lebanese imports and gave the top Lebanese officials in the country 48 hours to leave. Other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE followed suit, banning all Lebanese imports and expelling Lebanese diplomats. The UAE even went one step further to advise its residents to refrain from traveling to Lebanon. These bans were reportedly triggered by newly surfaced critical statements by Lebanon's Information Minister George Kordahi that the "war in Yemen is an aggression by Saudi and the UAE." Relatedly, [Qatar](#) also banned vegetable imports from Lebanon, reportedly due to trace amounts of E. coli bacteria found in the products. Worryingly, rumours have spread that the bans by the Gulf States may affect aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This is due in large part to the fact that Saudi's aid to Lebanon is conducted through the Saudi embassy in Lebanon. If it closes, there are fears that its support will stop as well.

Beirut between a rock and a hard place

Syrian refugees in Lebanon — and the institutions that support them — heavily rely on foreign aid, and Gulf states are major donors. Syrians will suffer if Gulf states cut their assistance to Lebanon in a bid to pressure Beirut politically. The risk goes up as winter approaches. Gulf states have often used trade and tourism as levers over Lebanon, which relies on foreign money pouring in from its wealthy neighbours. The import bans already enacted will also affect sectors in which Syrians are heavily represented, including agriculture and restaurants and services. Although nominally instigated by Kordahi's statements, the diplomatic row is, in reality, indicative of the [growing divide between Lebanon and its erstwhile Gulf patrons, especially Saudi Arabia](#). The role of Hezbollah — and with it, Iran's implicit influence in Lebanon — remains a key issue, but Riyadh and its neighbours will

struggle to reduce such influence in the country — to say nothing of Syria. Donors and the international community should be aware of the risks. As donor fatigue sets in more widely, any shock to the Lebanese system has potential to cause major blowback.



04 BAB AL-HAWA

Turkey Opens Border for Syrians Seeking Medical Care, Following Suspension

On 3 November, [media sources](#) reported that Turkey has re-opened its borders to allow Syrian patients to enter Turkey to undergo specialised medical treatments. Syrian nationals living in areas under effective Turkish administration in northern Syria have historically been allowed to enter Turkey to seek advanced medical care. However, travel was [reportedly halted](#) on 11 September, and Syrians were barred from receiving needed travel documents and permissions. The stoppage came as Turkish authorities reportedly sought to activate a new health system for treating Syrian patients in Turkish hospitals that would replace the current kimlik with a medical tourism document valid for one month. During the suspension period, Bab al-Hawa medical coordination authorities [observed](#) that at least 600 patients in northwest Syria lost access to medical services.

Looking for a lifeline

Health access is a pronounced challenge facing civilians in northwest Syria, and the recent stoppage comes at a worrying time for Turkey's evolving relationship with the region. While numerous NGOs provide medical services in the region, they lack the capacity to treat complex or advanced cases. For instance, the region has only one centre for breast cancer patients, the SAMS Oncology Centre at Idleb Central Hospital, which provides chemical and hormonal treatments but suffers a shortage in immunotherapy and radiation therapy, according to physicians working there. The wide-scale, purposeful targeting of medical facilities in northern Syria has only worsened these conditions. To cope with high patient load, some Syrians have been transferred to Turkey for treatment. It is not immediately clear that rollout of a new system is the actual cause of the suspension of cross-border care for Syrian patients, particularly amid growing political dissatisfaction in Turkey over refugees and the costs of Turkey's military interventions in Syria. The event should,

therefore, be a wakeup for crisis response actors. Donor support to the health sector in northwest Syria often implicitly assumes that overload can be absorbed by Turkey, but this is not necessarily a safe or durable long-term assumption. Ultimately, supporting a more robust and self-sufficient health system in northwest Syria will be the only way to mitigate such risks.



05 VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Reports Claim Turkey Stops Deploying Syrian Fighters in Libya

On 22 October, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) [reported](#) in an article that has since been widely cited that Turkey has begun withdrawing its Syrian mercenary forces from Libya. The report claimed that around 100 combatants recently sent to Libya returned to Syria in October. This comes a year after the [Libyan ceasefire](#), brokered by the United Nations, set a three-month deadline for all foreign forces to leave the country. Although Turkey and Russia [‘tentatively agreed’](#) to the ceasefire, both powers have continued to deploy Syrian combatants in support of military operations there. SOHR did not state the reason for the reported change in tack. However, COAR local sources in Libya and Syria indicate that there are no signs that such a change is yet taking place, despite the wide circulation of rumours stating as much. Local sources in northwest Syria posit that the return of fighters from Libya may be a routine step in redeployment and repatriation. Some, however, note that it may also be a step in preparation for [military operations](#) against the Kurdish-led SDF.

No exit strategy

Based on available information, it is doubtful that Ankara and Moscow have suspended their deployment of Syrian fighters to Libya, as widely reported. In the past, troop rotations have often been misinterpreted as escalations, rather than status quo maintenance. However, changing military needs inside Syria may well prompt one or both parties to adjust the balance of forces and their recruitment inside Syria. In the long term, the news — even if it is premature or inaccurate — should provide a decision point for donor governments contemplating the intersection of the conflicts in Syria and Libya. ‘Pipelines’ created by Turkey and Russia to recruit and deploy Syrian mercenaries in Libya have also developed into

networks for illicit economic activities and Mediterranean migration (see: [The Syria-Libya Conflict Nexus](#)). This nexus allows for the export of narcotics and the continued smuggling of goods and people. Donor governments will likely struggle to find the means of winding down these aspects of the growing Syria-Libya relationship long after mercenary recruitment itself stops.



06 THE HAGUE

‘People’s Tribunal’ in The Hague Sets Its Sights on Syria Accountability

On 2 November, a consortium of press freedom organisations [launched](#) a ‘people’s tribunal’ in The Hague to analyse and document repression of journalists in three contexts, including Syria. The press specialists and legal experts will examine the case of [Nabil Sharbaji](#) (aka Shorbaji), a Dar’a activist who has not been seen since his arrest by Air Force Intelligence in 2012, leading to his [transfer](#) to Sednaya prison. The findings of the consortium, led by Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Free Press Unlimited, [will not be](#) legally binding.

The growing appeal of legal accountability

Without the prospect of conventional prosecutions for war-time crimes, Syria has provided a test bed for attempts to realise accountability and justice through novel mechanisms, including prosecutions in Europe under the principles of universal jurisdiction. The ‘people’s tribunal’ is one such mechanism, and although its findings will not carry the force of law, the analysis it provides may support legal proceedings elsewhere in the future. Donors and aid actors have widely adopted legal accountability within their broader Syria portfolios. To date, however, few have managed to successfully align such efforts with the interests and priorities of grassroots and local organisations. Coordinating these actions and ensuring that what happens in The Hague matters for those in Hama — and Syrians elsewhere — will be vital to the success of such ambitions in the long term.

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.

Military intelligence officer killed after being lured away from post in southern Damascus

What Does It Say? A lieutenant from the Military Security Branch in Yalda was killed 200 metres from the checkpoint he was operating.

Reading Between the Lines: While possible, the immediate details of the attack do not indicate political motivations.

Source: Zaman al Wasl
Language: Arabic
Date: 1 November 2021

School Supervisors Silent Over Lack of Heating in Aleppo Schools

What Does It Say? Parents have filed complaints about inadequate heating of Aleppo schools. Teachers have stated that many of the windows and doors need serious maintenance in order to improve insulation.

Reading Between the Lines: The fuel shortage has likely contributed to the lack of heating.

Source: Enab Baladi
Language: Arabic
Date: 31 October 2021

Customs Patrols in Aleppo Anger City Merchants

What Does It Say? Increased customs patrols throughout the city have angered Aleppo merchants. The patrols restrict merchants' movements.

Reading Between the Lines: Many merchants are convinced that the increased patrols constitute an attempt to undermine the city's economy.

Source: Enab Baladi
Language: Arabic
Date: 1 November 2021

Israeli Air Strikes Target West of the Capital, Damascus

What Does It Say? Israeli airstrikes targeted a convoy west of Damascus reportedly carrying advanced weaponry bound for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Reading Between the Lines: Israel has launched hundreds of airstrikes into Syria, targeting Iranian-backed outposts. These types of incidents will likely continue to occur as long as Iran has a presence in Syria.

Source: Syria TV
Language: Arabic
Date: 3 November 2021

How UN staff are reshaping African cities

What Does It Say? Aid offices and the presence of foreign staff are having a marked impact on local economies, where an influx of cash and heightened demand for specialty products and services facilitate a unique form of gentrification.

Reading Between the Lines: Similar dynamics are apparent and indeed well documented in Syria, where the aid sector is among the most robust pillars of the national economy.

Source: The Economist
Language: English
Date: 30 October 2021

The forgotten railways of Syria and Lebanon: tales of a missed connection

What Does It Say? Once a major source of commerce and transportation in the Levant, the region's railways have been largely forgotten in the last three decades amidst regional conflicts and political and economic transitions.

Reading Between the Lines: While revitalisation of regional railways is indeed far-off, the article highlights the way that transnational transportation once facilitated important forms of cohesion and commerce between Syrians and Lebanese.

Source: Syria Untold
Language: English
Date: 29 October 2021

Remote sensing data indicates the role of conflict on deforestation in Syria

What Does It Say? As demand for cooking and heating energy outstripped fuel supply, many people have turned to burning firewood in recent years, contributing to a 25 percent loss in tree cover between 2011 and 2020.

Reading Between the Lines: On the heels of the Glasgow Climate Conference, donor countries are increasingly framing climate aid within a national security lens,

rooted in efforts to curb climate migration. Such framing will inevitably impact the way such programmes are designed in areas where climate change presents more immediate humanitarian implications, such as Syria.

Source: PAX Organisation
Language: English
Date: 2 November 2021

Syrian singer Sabah Fakhri dies at age of 88

What Does It Say? The Aleppan singer was a regional icon known for his emphatic performances and use of Arabic poetry in his music.

Reading Between the Lines: An often overlooked impact of the Syrian conflict is the way in which Syrian popular culture is increasingly viewed through politicised prisms. Sabah Fakhri represents a figure that transcended those political boundaries up until his death.

Source: Al Jazeera
Language: English
Date: 2 November 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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