

# Syria Update

## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

# In Damascus, UAE Minister Edges Closer to Normalisation, without Bringing New Deals

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Clashes highlight the tenuous security situation in northeast Syria and the continued threat of the Islamic State Pg 6

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*UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan meets Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, the highest-level meeting between the states since 2011. Handout image courtesy of SANA.*



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## WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST

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

On 9 November, Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during a surprise trip to [Damascus](#). It is the first such meeting between the Emirati and Syrian governments since 2011 and has been both celebrated and decried as a large step towards the normalisation of relations between Syria and regional actors. How exactly recent normalisation by Arab states will move beyond diplomatic symbolism is not yet clear. No doubt, the visit attenuates Syria's isolation, yet concrete steps to bring Damascus back in from the cold and return it to the Arab League have yet to materialise, despite such statements and visits. Donor governments should take notice. Regional pressure to normalise with Damascus will grow, irrespective of nominally hardline stances in the West. European and American decision-makers will face greater pressure to stand in the way of such normalisation or watch their presumed leverage wither as Arab governments move to mend ties with Damascus.

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

- 01 The Asayish launched an operation against an Islamic State (IS) cell in Deir-ez-Zor to thwart a planned attack on Sina'a prison, which holds around 5,000 captured IS fighters. An increase in IS attacks is a reminder of its continued operational capacity and the tenuous security situation in northeast Syria.
- 02 The Syrian Government introduced new changes to its school curriculum to teach details of the Syrian conflict and the state's efforts to rid the country of "terrorists." Donors and aid organisations engaging with the Ministry of Education on education programmes should be wary of the role their own programmes could play in facilitating harmful, politicised narratives to Syrian youth.
- 03 On 8 November, the U.S. Treasury published new clarifications, which specify that contractors working in early recovery and stabilisation activities do not face the threat of sanctions. The move does not create new space, but it may ensure that such activities are not made collateral damage by sanctions barring reconstruction.
- 04 Leadership within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Autonomous Administration alike struggle to re-negotiate their political alignment amidst the anticipation of a Turkish incursion. The SDF might have little manoeuvre beyond the route offered by Moscow, which could itself put SDF governance structures in jeopardy. Aid actors should be ready for the possibility of both scenarios happening together.
- 05 At least 2,000 migrants, among them Syrians, are stranded at the Belarusian-Polish border and enduring freezing conditions in the hope of crossing into the EU amidst a new political rift between Belarus and the EU. The crisis is yet another example of the way Europe's migration crisis has become increasingly politicised.

03  

WASHINGTON

Treasury Eases Sanctions Rules for Early Recovery and Stabilisation

04  

QUAMISHLI, AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE; MOSCOW

SDF Sends Conflicting Messages on Partners, Defence Pact with Damascus

01 

SDF Thwarts IS Prison Attack as Autonomous Administration Approves a New Anti-Terror Law

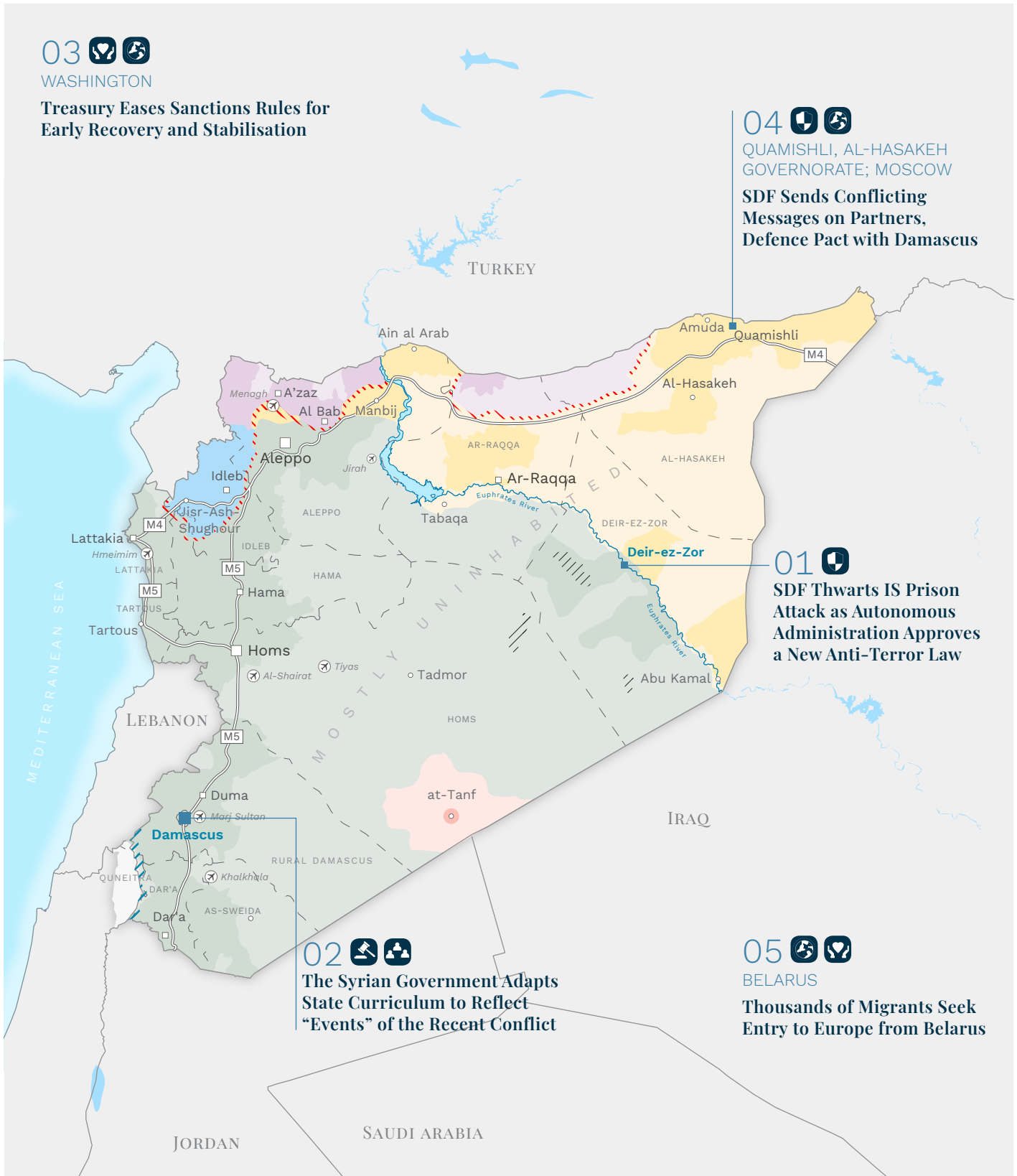
02  

The Syrian Government Adapts State Curriculum to Reflect "Events" of the Recent Conflict






05  

BELARUS

Thousands of Migrants Seek Entry to Europe from Belarus



Population Density

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

100 km 

Territorial Control

-  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 9 November, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan met with President Bashar al-Assad during an official visit to Damascus. Nahyan is the most senior Emirati official to lead a delegation to the Syrian capital since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The parties discussed bilateral relations, intensifying efforts to bolster “brotherly” ties between the UAE and Damascus, and commercial relations between the two countries. Although no new deals were struck during the visit, it is yet another prompt for political debate over regional rapprochement with Damascus.

### No new thing under the sun

Even as modest efforts to re-establish relations with al-Assad gain steam, regional states have yet to follow through with concrete steps to increase relationships beyond communications, to say nothing of major investments of the type that would signal full-bore normalisation. That may be changing, however. The visit may give momentum to other states keen to test whether Western states’ warnings against a return to Damascus are all bark and no bite.

Syrian-Emirati rapprochement is by no means new. In 2018 the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus, a move it justified as an effort to curb external interference in Arab-Syrian affairs. In October 2021 Damascus also participated in the Expo Dubai 2020 trade fair. The gestures are evidence of the extent to which the UAE has reversed course, having once provided robust support for armed opposition groups seeking to topple al-Assad. Naturally, the Emirates’ changing arithmetic on Syria is driven by economic needs and regional politicking. Both countries seek to reap the economic fruit of normalised relations: the UAE has a vibrant private sector, and there is hope in Syria that private investment can overcome the international community’s unwillingness to engage in reconstruction without political change in Damascus. The UAE may also be seeking to contain Iranian and Turkish influence in Syria. Some believe easing al-Assad’s isolation would wean Damascus off Tehran and support an emboldened posture against Turkey.

The UAE is not the only country to seek a thaw in relations with Syria. The visit coincided with signals from Algeria and Egypt over a notional willingness to welcome Syria back into the Arab League. At a public event in Washington on 9 November, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed “hope” that Syria could regain its status in the Arab League, provided authorities in Damascus deal with the aftermath of the conflict, including refugee and humanitarian affairs. This will be a tall order to fill, but Syria’s regional critics may be flexible, given their hope that Syria can once again take up what Shoukry described as its “traditional role”

in supporting Arab regional security. Going even further, on 10 November, Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra, decried external interference in Syrian affairs. Stressing that Algiers initially opposed Syria’s suspension from the Arab League, he advocated for Syria’s return, saying “we are looking forward to the reunion.” In recent months, Jordan, too, has made a striking about-face towards Damascus, becoming the most vocal proponent of pragmatic Arab cooperation with a Syrian Government headed by Bashar al-Assad (see: [Syria Update 30 August 2021](#) and [20 September 2021](#)).

The U.S. has voiced concern over warming relations. Following the UAE visit, Washington urged states in the region to carefully consider “atrocities” perpetrated by the Syrian Government. However, American officials have stopped short of drawing red lines or using the threat of secondary sanctions. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the Biden administration will not support normalisation with or the rehabilitation of Bashar al-Assad, whom Price described as “a brutal dictator” — pointed words, but not the veto of regional normalisation that proponents of continued isolation are hoping for. Some former and current officials in the U.S. administration believe that Arab states’ detente with Syria is driven by the desire to counter Iran, facilitated by the fact that Washington has so far failed to give an unambiguous ‘no’. Washington, too, has prioritised efforts to undo Trump-era policies with Iran at the head of its otherwise back-burner regional policies.

### Putting their money where their mouth is?

Regional normalisation with Damascus has been a fixation among analysts, the many opponents of Bashar al-Assad, and Syrian officials themselves. So far, however, few if any tangible benefits have arisen from these rapprochement attempts. To date, regional investors and businesses have refrained from substantively investing in Syrian reconstruction. That may be changing, particularly if would-be investors see tacit acceptance from Washington. Syrian state media have used the UAE visit to publicise a previously negotiated agreement between a group of Emirati companies and the Syrian Ministry of Electricity to build a 300-megawatt photovoltaic power plant in Rural Damascus Governorate. The deal has been seen as a step to fulfil the Emirati Foreign Minister’s support for his country’s efforts to “end the Syrian crisis” and “consolidate stability” in the country. A Syrian business delegation has also travelled to the UAE, seeking investment. Like so many other deals to invest in Syria — particularly those inked by Iran — no hard monetary commitments have yet been made.

Aid implementers and donor governments will be forced to navigate an uncertain road ahead. It is unclear how the U.S. and other Western governments will respond to some Arab

states' changing position on Syria. Regional players who once supported efforts to unseat al-Assad have a pragmatic interest in mending ties. They are clearly unable and unwilling to isolate al-Assad indefinitely, particularly when doing so runs contrary to their own interests. Investments in blighted sectors such as electricity will ease humanitarian needs in Syria, but so far, no such deals — and there have been many — have improved Syrians' access to power. Should border restrictions ease, greater economic cooperation among regional states may provide Syria with much-needed foreign trade, reducing the strain on foreign reserves and stabilising the volatile currency. However, if states move too far too fast, they risk triggering sanctions or political pressure from the West. There is little that crisis response actors or donor governments can do to shape these currents, but they should watch closely as investment from foreign governments and private firms returns.

☞ *Syria's regional critics may be flexible, given their hope that Syria can once again take up what Shoukry described as its "traditional role" in supporting Arab regional security.*

## WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



## 01 DEIR-EZ-ZOR

## SDF Thwarts IS Prison Attack as Autonomous Administration Approves a New Anti-Terror Law

On 8 November, the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) of northeast Syria reportedly clashed with an Islamic State (IS) cell in Deir-ez-Zor, resulting in one person being killed, four arrested, and large amounts of ammunition seized. The operation was reportedly carried out to thwart IS plans to attack Sina'a prison in Al-Hasakeh city, which holds an estimated 5,000 captured IS fighters. In retaliation, IS sleeper cells launched a series of attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), leading to a number of injuries. The uptick in violence comes as the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned on 5 November that IS appears “poised to increase activity” across different parts of Syria, amid an increase in attacks against Syrian Government forces, infrastructure, supply routes, and Iranian-backed militias in the Government-controlled Badia region since September.

The confrontation comes alongside news that on 9 November, the Autonomous Administration approved a new anti-terrorism law with the aim to unify detention and systematise the trials for Syrians detained in SDF prisons accused of terrorism. The law contains twenty articles that define acts of terrorism and outline penalties for attempting terrorist acts, smuggling, as well as the possession of weapons and ammunition. The law also penalises fatal terrorist acts with sentences of life imprisonment. Syrian IS members are currently tried in two ‘People’s Defense’ courts in the northeast located in Quamishli and Ain al-Arab (Kobani).

### IS Remains a Threat, but also an ‘Opportunity’

The recent increase in IS attacks is a reminder of the continued presence and operational capacity of the group amid the tenuous security situation in large parts of Syria, including the northeast. In October, the SDF and Asayish conducted 21 raids resulting in 69 arrests and three deaths of so-called IS affiliates. There are estimated to be up to 10,000 IS fighters in Syria, with a further 10,000 to 15,000 detainees of various nationalities held in SDF prisons. The SDF has often emphasised the risk of IS prison breaks and escape attempts, particularly when it faces outside threats. The most notable previous instance came during Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in 2019, when the SDF command advocated for transferring prison guards to the frontlines. With the threat of a renewed

incursion by Turkey, the need to push back against IS insurgents could very well serve as the basis of pleas by the SDF for greater international support.

The new anti-terrorism law is a welcome sign that justice may soon be served to those who have committed violence on behalf of IS. However, the judicial system still lacks the technical capacity to process thousands of cases in a timely manner while effectively maintaining the rights of defendants. New, tougher penalties for acts of terror are also unlikely to form any sort of additional deterrent for IS recruitment. IS continues to raise funds and recruit within displaced persons camps such as al-Hol, and its appeal in Al-Hasakeh and Deir-ez-Zor governorates is still buoyed by poverty and disaffection owing to governance shortcomings by the Autonomous Administration (see: Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring Pilot Project May 2021). There is a distinct risk that expanded anti-terror powers will be misused and politicised, furthering the communal dissatisfaction that already undermines Kurdish rule in northeast Syria. The threat of an IS resurgence highlights the continued need for inclusive stabilisation in northeast Syria, focused not only on security but also livelihoods and services, the lack of which only fuel resentment and possible radicalisation.



## 02 DAMASCUS, DAMASCUS GOVERNORATE

## The Syrian Government Adapts State Curriculum to Reflect “Events” of the Recent Conflict

On 6 November, Syria’s Ministry of Education announced the establishment of a committee to incorporate information about the ongoing conflict into Syria’s public school curriculum. New materials will provide Damascus’s perspective on events since 2011 in a range of school subjects, including history, social sciences, Arabic language, and religious studies. The curriculum aims to inculcate students with an understanding of “what really happened” over the course of the war, highlighting the Syrian Government’s efforts to combat “terrorism” (a term often used in reference to all opposition activities). In August 2021, the ministry also introduced ‘social emotional learning’ courses to state curricula, aimed at teaching Syrian students interpersonal skills and concepts such as empathy and tolerance.

## New Curriculum, Same Red Lines

The new curriculum represents a continuation of state-sponsored narrative building within public education which pre-dates the conflict and even Bashar al-Assad's term in power. Ba'athist ideology and government narratives have long been incorporated into Syrian state curricula since the Ba'ath party's rise to power, oftentimes through the use of politicised disinformation. The recent adaptation indicates that Damascus is keen to continue that policy in Syria's 'post-war' phase. At the same time, shifting public perception will prove more difficult than it once was in Syria: most young Syrians experienced some aspect of the war and its knock-on effects, and despite censorship, many have higher access to alternative forms of information via the internet and social media than their parents' generation.

The news presents ethical considerations for aid agencies engaging in education programmes in Government-controlled areas. Programmers should be cautious of the ways their own education activities could come to reinforce or create new channels for imposing potentially harmful narratives on communities that have experienced conflict. Such risks should be analysed and mitigated early on in programme design, and aid practitioners based in Damascus would be well-placed to utilise their channels of communication with government institutions to push back on such amendments.



### 03 WASHINGTON

## Treasury Eases Sanctions Rules for Early Recovery and Stabilisation

On 8 November, the U.S. Treasury [published](#) new clarifications that, in theory, will facilitate stabilisation and early recovery activities in Syria. The clarifications are believed to be the first time that the U.S. Government has specifically stipulated that overtly non-humanitarian aid activities carried out in Syria are exempt from sanctions risk. The statement authorises activities by contractors and vendors serving the UN, NGOs, and U.S. agencies.

### Early Recovery Conundrum

The clarifications come as donors and implementing agencies struggle to move beyond a largely directionless "humanitarian-plus" response toward more robust, impactful, and accountable aid interventions. Clarifying the exemptions does not in itself open greater space or create meaningful

exemptions, as demanded by implementers. Additionally, the announcement will not ease the chilling effect of U.S. economic sanctions as a whole. However, it does certify that the U.S. Government is willing to draw a line between reconstruction activities – [outlawed](#) by the Caesar sanctions – and stabilisation and early recovery programming, which Washington tacitly endorsed when striking an agreement with Moscow to extend the cross-border resolution, UNSC 2585 (see: [Syria Update 12 July 2021](#)). A more concrete push for early recovery programming is likely in the remaining months under the cross-border resolution, as Russia is likely to condition its renewal of the resolution on visible signs of progress toward more significant early recovery action.



### 04 QUAMISHLI, AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE; MOSCOW

## SDF Sends Conflicting Messages on Partners, Defence Pact with Damascus

On 8 November, the spokesperson for the Autonomous Administration, Luqman Ahmi, [declared](#) that the statelet "will not surrender any of its territories to the Syrian regime's forces." However, the following day, the deputy co-chair of the Autonomous Administration Executive Council, Badran Jia Kurd, stated that the SDF have a common defence mechanism with the Syrian Government which would be triggered in the event of an attack on the region by Turkish-backed forces. Kurd stated that the Council is open to talks "with all parties." On 11 November, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby clarified that the U.S. partnership with the SDF is "specifically and solely on the ISIS threat in Syria." Earlier this month, U.S. troops reportedly visited the SDF-controlled Tal Tamer, located at the front-lines with Turkish-influenced Peace Spring territories, triggering media reports – likely overblown – about the possible [establishment](#) of a new U.S. base in the town. Amid Turkey's increasingly bellicose rhetoric, the Autonomous Administration issued a [statement](#) calling on both Russia and the U.S.-led international coalition to "play a responsible role in de-escalating the situation."

### War vs a Deal with Moscow?

The above statements evidence the Autonomous Administration's dearth of appealing options in the face of possible military escalation on its northern borders with Tur-

key. Dissonance within the Autonomous Administration likely reflects the diverse interests and affected optimism of competing factions. The Pentagon's statement, meanwhile, reflects the extent to which the U.S. seeks to limit its partnership with the SDF. It may be difficult, however, to sustain the partnership within these constraints if or when the SDF switches its approach to focus on resisting Turkish military incursion. After all, it is not clear that Russia or the Government of Syria have the capacity to suppress an IS resurgence. A coordination mechanism reportedly existed between the SDF and Government of Syria forces during the Turkish Peace Spring Operation in 2019. However, Russian and Government forces were late to step in, and their support has been a stalking horse for greater Russian presence across the northern frontier of Autonomous Administration territory (Al-Hasakeh Governorate). No doubt, however, Moscow is poised to exploit such tensions to push for a deal between the SDF and Damascus (see: [Syria Update 8 November 2021](#)). Looking ahead, any re-alignment between the SDF and Syrian Government would place residents and organisations that oppose Damascus at threat of retaliation, including through the possibility of forced displacement as part of a 'reconciliation' deal akin to those implemented in south and central Syria. As such, the fallout of any potential military incursion by Turkey will come from Damascus, too.



## 05 BELARUS

### Thousands of Migrants Seek Entry to Europe from Belarus

On 11 November, [media sources](#) reported that at least 2,000 people, primarily from Iraq, as well as from Syria and Lebanon, are stuck in freezing conditions at the Belarusian-Polish border. At least seven people have died from hypothermia in recent weeks due to freezing overnight temperatures. The EU has listed some 20 countries from which migrants have flown into Minsk, mainly on tourist visas, many travelling from crisis zones in the Middle East with hopes of crossing from Belarus into the European Union to apply for asylum. The EU [says](#) that the migrant flow has been deliberately orchestrated by Belarus in retaliation for sanctions imposed on Minsk over human rights abuses. Belarus responded by threatening to cut off gas supplies to Europe if new sanctions were imposed. On 11 November, the U.S., the U.K., and France [issued](#) a joint statement at an emergency UN Security Council meeting, accusing Belarus

**F** *the crisis in Belarus is testament to the extent to which Europe's neighbourhood policy, including refugee hosting agreements with intermediary states, places it at the mercy of actors outside Europe.*

of putting migrants' lives in danger "for political purposes." Russia, Belarus's most important ally, rejected the Western accusations and accused Poland and neighbouring Lithuania of mistreating migrants. Poland has been accused of sending migrants back across its eastern border into Belarus and adopting an increasingly militarised posture towards them. Migrants have attempted to cut through the barbed wire fence at the border, but were repelled by Polish border guards; still, some managed to slip through.

#### Migration weaponised

The events are a political manipulation of humanitarian crises and migrants' desperation by a European pariah state. EU [measures](#) to prevent international airlines carrying migrants from landing at the Minsk airport have been weighed. Meanwhile, on 12 November, Turkey, following up on its earlier promise, banned Syrian, Yemeni, and Iraqi citizens from flights to Minsk, potentially sealing off one of the main routes used by migrants to reach Belarus. Iraq has stated that it is organising repatriation flights for Iraqi nationals from Belarus, but it is doubtful that many will be eager to turn back after making considerable investments to reach Minsk. The issues at stake are larger than any single driver of migration, and Europe's migration policies and practices themselves are now in the spotlight. Domestic political pressures inside Europe make migration issues especially sensitive, and the crisis in Belarus is testament to the extent to which Europe's neighbourhood policy, including refugee hosting agreements with intermediary states, places it at the mercy of actors outside Europe. Despite major deals concerning refugees in Turkey and Libya, the emergence of Belarus as a migration thoroughway in recent months demonstrates the adaptability of migration routes. In the long term, a re-think of European migration practice is needed. For the time being, steps to limit migration in countries of origin will remain inadequate so long as development goals, economic empowerment, and credible human rights targets are not achieved.



## 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.

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### How the United States Should Approach Normalization Efforts with Syria

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**What Does it Say?** The piece argues that in response to regional normalisation with the Government of Syria, the U.S. must devise an unambiguous policy while maintaining — and applying — sanctions with force.

**Reading between the lines:** While the premise is true, U.S. allies are re-engaging with Damascus, it is not clear that the approach called for is workable. The U.S.'s lack of disengagement from Syria has created seemingly deliberate ambiguity designed to allow slow but undeniable rapprochement with Damascus.

**Source:** [Heritage Foundation](#)

**Language:** English

**Date:** 9 November 2021

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### Weaponization of Aid, Interference and Corruption - SACD

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**What Does it Say?** Based on interviews with NGO and CSO workers in Syria, the report seeks to quantify the extent of interference in aid operations in Syria.

**Reading between the lines:** The report is a useful and timely contribution to the literature, and it coincides with increasing donor scrutiny over monetary and exchange rate practices that sap donor funds of value during implementation.

**Source:** [Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity](#)

**Language:** English

**Date:** 11 November 2021

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### On the Edge of the Capital: Social Engineering in North-Eastern Damascus

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**What Does it Say?** The study explores how the conflict has granted Damascus authorities the power to reshape long-neglected areas on the northeast fringes of the capital.

**Reading between the lines:** The report clarifies some of the underlying and evolving conditions that have led to the continued marginalisation of these areas, and its focus on key stakeholders shows the importance of local conflict sensitivity procedures for such areas.

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

**Language:** English

**Date:** 11 November 2021

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## Syria Reservoir Dries up for First Time

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**What Does it Say?** A dam in rural Idleb has dried for the first time since 1994, leaving hundreds of families that rely on it for agricultural irrigation without an alternative.

**Reading between the lines:**

Such events are a predictable consequence of climate change, and aid implementers must hedge against such risks by building climate resilience into their programs.

**Source:** AFP

**Language:** English

**Date:** 11 November 2021

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## Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report

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**What Does it Say?** The Department of Defense's quarterly report notes that although a U.S. military repositioning in Iraq has not impacted counter-IS operations in Syria, IS is nonetheless expanding and becoming more ambitious across Syria.

**Reading between the lines:** Donor governments must be aware that stabilisation efforts remain a priority to minimise the force of the drivers of IS recruitment and mobilisation in Syria.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Defense

**Language:** English

**Date:** 11 November 2021

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