

# Syria Update

## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

# Damascus Doubles Down and Pushes Reconciliation Drive in Deir-ez-Zor

## WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW

### Damascus Hails 'Positive' Refugee Returns Conference

Russia and the Syrian Government launched the second round of the international conference on the return of Syrian refugees to Syria. [Pg 6](#)

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Claims that Javad Ghaffari was removed "upon al-Assad's request" dismissed by Iran as "fabrication by the Zionist media." [Pg 6](#)

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### Furor Erupts over U.S. Plan to Send 3,000 Tonnes of Wheat Seed to Northern Syria

While the Syrian Government's allegations of sabotage are erroneous, the seeds could have a deleterious impact on the wheat sector if not properly tested. [Pg 8](#)

*Syrians reconcile their status with central authorities in Deir-ez-Zor. Image courtesy of Sputnik.*



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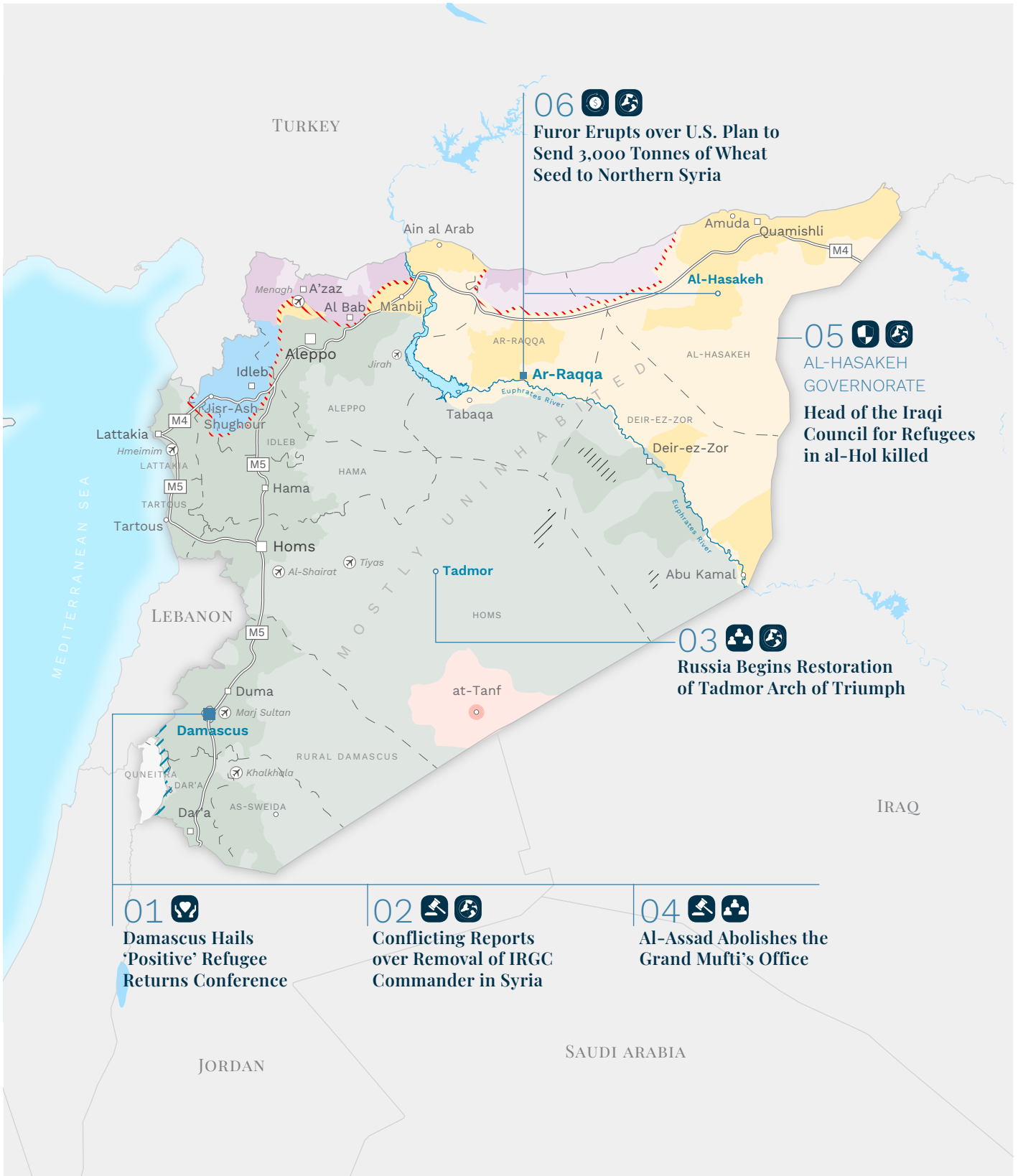
## WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST

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

A reconciliation campaign is underway in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. As many as 2,000 people are said to have applied for reconciliation with Damascus so far as the Government of Syria offers reconciliation to wanted individuals, including those from under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The push exploits pressure facing the SDF as threats of a Turkish military operation in northeast Syria persist, and it widens fissures between the SDF and local communities in its sphere of influence. Insofar as it is open to the populations of SDF areas, the reconciliation drive exploits local grievances with the Autonomous Administration, and it cashes in on concern over the prospect of a Turkish-led military incursion to the north.

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

- On 15 November, the International Conference on the Return of Syrian Refugees began for the second consecutive year. Russian and Syrian delegations reportedly discussed technical improvement in various sectors, yet their efforts have done little to stop the flow of refugees as support for rehabilitation and early recovery remain limited.
- Reports, denied by Iranian and Syrian officials, claim that Iranian Quds Force commander Javad Ghaffari was ousted by President Bashar al-Assad for actions that “violated Syrian sovereignty.” Nevertheless, belief that the dismissal of Ghaffari represents a rift between Tehran and Damascus likely represents wishful thinking on behalf of analysts and those who hope to see a reduction in the Iranian presence in Syria.
- Russia has begun restoring Tadmor's Arch of Triumph, a pre-Islamic historical marvel destroyed by the Islamic State. Russia's interest in cultural heritage is calculated, but donors should take note: such sites have a deep impact on stabilisation in their communities.
- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has abolished the Grand Mufti's office. While some have attributed the move to a personal dispute, its significance comes as a signifier of greater efforts to institutionalise religion in Syria. Implementers reliant on religious organisations should follow such developments closely.
- On 13 November, Islamic State (IS) elements infiltrated al-Hol camp and shot several refugees, killing the head of the Iraqi Council for Refugees in the camp and another person. The deadly attacks underscore that as long as the issue of refugees in al-Hol camp and IS-affiliated detainees in SDF detention remains unsolved, attacks and security threats will continue.
- The U.S. Embassy in Damascus has announced that it will deliver 3,000 tonnes of wheat seed to areas under Autonomous Administration control. While the Syrian Government's claims that this is deliberate sabotage are wrong, they do raise legitimate concerns about the nature of the support, and possible “do no harm” impacts.



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**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 17 November, al-Watan, a newspaper close to the Government of Syria, [reported](#) that a reconciliation drive is underway in Government-controlled areas of Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. The procedures are targeting individuals wanted by the Government of Syria for military service, either after desertion or draft evasion. Crucially, authorities have also opened their arms to residents of neighbouring areas of Deir-ez-Zor controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Al-Watan – echoing other [pro-state media](#) – has [hailed the campaign](#) as a success, reporting that as many as 2,000 people have reconciled so far. It is unclear what proportion of those seeking reconciliation have come from SDF- or Government-controlled areas. Although reconciliation procedures are not new in Syria, their revival in Deir-ez-Zor now is provocative. Implicitly, the campaign allows the Government to consolidate control in the region, and by opening the door to the predominantly Arab tribal populations of SDF areas to reconcile their status, authorities are inviting them to wager over the long-term future of the region, irrespective of which local actors hold sway in their area for the time being.

### Cashing in on chaos

Although it is difficult to assess how many reconciliations have taken place, their political significance is readily apparent. Insofar as it is open to the populations of SDF areas, the reconciliation drive exploits local grievances with the Autonomous Administration and concern over the prospect of a Turkish-led military incursion to the north. Northeast Syria authorities clearly see the reconciliations as a threat. Among those to reconcile is Khalaf al-Asa'd, former head of the SDF Legislative Council in Deir-ez-Zor and a notable member of the prominent Bagara tribe. On 17 November, the Legislative Council issued a [statement](#) in which it threatened to suspend any employee of the Deir-ez-Zor civil administration found to have reconciled with Damascus. Not surprisingly, reactions to the news have commonly linked the development to broader dynamics in the northeast, threats of a Turkish incursion into SDF-controlled areas, and ongoing discussions between the SDF and Damascus (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Implicitly, the Government is seizing on geopolitical upheaval and resulting vulnerabilities [to undermine](#) local trust in the SDF's staying power, a question perennially raised by the threat of Turkish incursion.

### A familiar template

Of course, Damascus has other reasons to strengthen its hand in eastern Syria. For one, it is triumphant after a summertime military campaign in Dar'a Governorate forced former opposition fighters to capitulate and reconcile, hand over weapons, and in some cases, displace to the north. Those efforts were led by Major General Hussam Louka, Director

of Syrian Intelligence. Only weeks ago, Louka was relieved of responsibility for the committee in charge of reconciliation in the south, and he has now set his sights on the east (see: [Syria Update 11 November 2021](#)). On 14 November, Louka [met](#) tribal leaders and senior Ba'ath Party officials overseeing reconciliation proceedings in eastern Syria, both of which are important vectors of influence locally (see: [Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria](#)).

For another, Damascus may be seeking to rein in the region's relative independent streak. It has been reported, but not confirmed, that the Government of Syria will extend the reconciliation campaign to Abu Kamal and Mayadin, two geographically important communities where the presence of central authorities is scarcely palpable. This is a reality which Iran [has exploited](#), and many local militia groups look not to Damascus, but Tehran. Key communities along the Euphrates River are heavily under Iran's influence, creating the conditions for local clashes and contests over war economy activities. Reconciliation in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate will impede recruitment by such militias, an alternative favoured over Syrian Arab Army service due to higher pay and a reduced likelihood of deployment to conflict frontlines.

Unlike in other reconciled former opposition areas, Damascus has been slow to push for meaningful control in eastern Syria, to say nothing of broad-based reconciliation, since it recaptured the area from the Islamic State (IS) in 2017. The fact that Deir-ez-Zor was forcibly retaken from IS forces could be one reason for the delay. Re-mobilising Syrians who joined or sympathised with IS could pose internal risks to the Syrian Arab Army. Damascus also benefits from the fact that IS sleeper cells across the region continue to bedevil the SDF, undermining the authority of and local buy-in for the Autonomous Administration.

### Looking ahead

Many analysts have seen the reconciliation drive through the prism of geopolitical developments. The threat of a new Turkish incursion is one such issue. A rumoured (and specious) rift between Damascus and Tehran is another. In reality, the Syrian Government's motivations are likely diverse. In general, the central authorities have kept reconciled areas at arm's length, ramping up engagement only when there is a direct economic or security imperative. In the absence of restoring services, administration, and governance, reconciliation offers a powerful symbol of its nominal authority.

Implementers should ask what the latest drive means for the relationship between central authorities and peripheral areas of eastern Syria. It is unclear whether the return of a reconciliation campaign signals a changing approach,

however. If it does, lessons should be drawn from recent reconciliations in southern Syria, where Damascus seemingly lost patience with the quasi-independent trajectory of the region. There are key differences in Deir-ez-Zor, however. Since 2017, the operational space for organisations working in eastern Syria has been limited by restrictions imposed by Damascus and the lack of plausible entry points. Local organisations in Deir-ez-Zor have been characterised as inefficient vehicles of self-dealing among management who are close to the Government of Syria. In SDF areas, if large numbers of men reconcile, their move will be read as a long-term bet on Damascus. This would increase tensions in affected areas, and it would draw greater attention to the gap between community-level grievances and top-level decision-making in the Autonomous Administration. For aid actors, the latest reconciliation campaign may bring change to the region, but it is unlikely to be positive.

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## WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



## 01 DAMASCUS

## Damascus Hails ‘Positive’ Refugee Returns Conference

On 15 November, Russian and Syrian delegations launched the second round of the international conference on refugee returns in Damascus. Representatives of several countries allied with Damascus attended the first round of the conference a year ago, including China, Iran, and Venezuela, while Turkey and the EU boycotted the event. The UN attended in an observational role (see: [Syria Update 2 November 2020](#)). It is unclear whether delegations from countries other than Russia were part of the second round. The event was reportedly attended by representatives from almost all the Syrian ministries and representatives of several governorates, with Hussein Makhlof, Minister of Local Administration, leading the Syrian delegation. The Russian delegation, headed by Alexander Yevmov, President Putin’s special envoy to Syria, also included the Vice President of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation and Monitoring of internally displaced people (IDPs) inside Syria. On 17 November, the Russian delegation also met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and they reportedly discussed the “positive results achieved on the ground” to provide the proper conditions for “continued refugee returns” and “accelerated reconciliations.”

### Russian hopes for return of refugees grows

Russia is still eager for the conference to gain international support, but main signposts of success, including refugee return and support for reconstruction, are little seen, despite changing regional approaches to Damascus and a high-profile refugee crisis on the European border. Return conditions may in fact be worsening, and Government-held areas have seen a new wave of migration of thousands of Syrians in recent months due to insecurity and economic devastation (see: [Syria Update 20 September 2021](#) and [Syria Update 15 November 2021](#)). This likely offsets any returns since the first round of the international conference in November 2020. Refugees remain at-risk in host countries, particularly in the region and large-scale refugee return remains elusive.

*Russia is still eager for the conference to gain international support, but the main signposts of success, including refugee return and support for reconstruction, are little seen, despite changing regional approaches to Damascus and a high-profile refugee crisis on the European border.*



## 02 DAMASCUS

## Conflicting Reports over Removal of IRGC Commander in Syria

On 10 November, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Javad Ghaffari was reportedly dismissed by President Bashar al-Assad. Ghaffari has served as head of the IRGC forces in Syria since 2015, and was dubbed the ‘butcher of Aleppo’ by the Syrian opposition for his role in the Battle of Aleppo. Reports claim that Ghaffari provoked al-Assad’s ire due to his role in smuggling and establishing a black market for weapons, deploying Iranian equipment and forces to unapproved sites, and launching an unsanctioned attack against the U.S. base in al-Tanf on 20 October, risking a wider conflict.

Iranian officials dismissed the reports, noting that Ghaffari received a medal of honour from the Syrian defence minister for his role in the Syria conflict. Iranian media suggested the reports were part of a ploy by Saudi and Israeli media — who originally broke the story — to undermine Iran in Syria by claiming that relations between Tehran and Damascus were strained. Other sources suggest that the decision to dismiss Ghaffari was made in mid-October, before the attack on al-Tanf and the visit of the Emirati foreign minister, possibly for health reasons. Reports named Ali Asaf, a Lebanese national previously identified as a Hezbollah operative, as the new head of the Quds Force in Syria.

### A storm in a chai cup?

Analysts have suggested that al-Assad is seeking to limit Iranian presence in Syria to pave the way for further reintegration with regional Arab powers on the heels of a visit to Damascus by the Emirati foreign minister last week (see [Syria Update November 15, 2021](#)). Indeed, the reports are likely being conflated with news of Iran’s waning influence in Syria amidst Arab normalisation, a precondition of which — according to a leaked document sponsored by Jordan — is reducing Iranian influence in parts of Syria. However, beyond military involvement, Iran has extensive and growing economic, educational, and cultural interests across Syria, the

importance of which are much greater than the fate of one IRGC commander. If reports that Ghaffari was dismissed by al-Assad are true, it likely represents a negotiated adjustment to the Iran–Syria relationship rather than a rift or a break. As the need for Iran’s military support declines, al-Assad will turn to questions of reconstruction and balancing the often competing interests of potential economic partners – Iran, Russia, and Arab states. It is these interests, rather than IRGC commanders, that will shape the future relationships of Syria in the region.



### 03 TADMOR, HOMS GOVERNORATE

## Russia Begins Restoration of Tadmor Arch of Triumph

On 12 November, Russia began its efforts to restore historical sites in Tadmor (aka Palmyra) in coordination with UNESCO and the Department of Antiquities and Museums in Syria (DAMS). The ancient city was captured and destroyed by IS twice before Syrian Government forces, backed by Russia, established full control in 2017. During their tenure, IS fighters destroyed many renowned monuments, including the Arch of Triumph, and looted the Palmyra City Museum. The city also reportedly suffered damage from Russian and Syrian Government bombardment during their campaign to recapture it. 20 artefacts are so far slated for restoration through a collaboration between Russia’s Hermitage Museum and the National Museum of Oman, with a view of later restoring all of the ancient city.

Russia first expressed interest in restoring the ruins in 2016, when the General Director of Russia’s Hermitage Museum presented President Vladimir Putin with a restoration proposal and subsequently communicated to UNESCO Russia’s willingness to restore the artefacts. In November 2019, Syria’s Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums and the Hermitage Museum signed a memorandum of understanding to rebuild the Arch of Triumph.

### Raiders of the lost Arch

The initiation of work in Tadmor signals the extent to which Russia seeks to place itself at the centre of any international efforts to restore the many historical sites in Syria that were damaged during the war. In some respects, this is merely another vehicle of Russian prestige and influence, which are

already strong in military terms, but tenuous economically and socially. However, it is worth noting that Russia has advanced technical expertise in the field, primarily because of efforts undertaken to restore its own heritage sites after World War II. Donors should take note of sites of historical, cultural, and traditional significance in Syria. Such sites are of outsized importance, and their destruction across Syria has alienated communities from their hometowns (see: [Syria Update 21 June 2021](#)). Restoration may stem migration and even encourage return, a priority for Russia as well as Europe.



### 04 DAMASCUS

## Al-Assad Abolishes the Grand Mufti’s Office

On 15 November, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued a decree abolishing the position of Grand Mufti, the highest Islamic authority in Syria, effectively firing Grand Mufti Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun. The decree delegates tasks previously assigned to the Grand Mufti, such as setting the date of religious holidays and issuing religious rulings known as fatwas, to the “Jurisprudential Scientific Council” (a body dedicated to Quranic interpretation), which is led by Minister of Religious Endowments Mohammed Abdul Sattar. The Council also includes 25 religious figures from all sects in Syria, a move which was seen as diminishing the influence of Sunni scholars within the body. The recent decree came after the Council criticised Hassoun’s interpretation of a Quranic verse, although without naming him, claiming it was not rooted in the principles of critical Quranic exegesis. Notably, in 2018, al-Assad ordered the establishment of a religious council of which the Mufti is a member only, granting the Minister of Endowment the authority to nominate the Mufti for a three-year term. Prior to 2018, the Mufti could remain in office until retirement, and could only be appointed or removed by the President. The Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council denounced the decree and accused the Syrian Government of attacking Syrian Sunnis by abolishing the highly symbolic position.

### Reining in religion

Many analysts have attributed the decree to a longstanding power struggle between the Grand Mufti and the Minister of Religious Endowments. The decree does follow recent disputes between the Mufti and the Council over Quranic inter-

However, rather than merely replacing Hassoun, the decision to abolish the position altogether should be seen as part of longstanding efforts by the Syrian Government, especially the Ministry of Endowments, to institutionalise religious authority in the country and assimilate it within official government structures.

pretation. However, rather than merely replacing Hassoun, the decision to abolish the position altogether should be seen as part of longstanding efforts by the Syrian Government, especially the Ministry of Endowments, to institutionalise religious authority in the country and assimilate it within official government structures. In that respect, it follows a speech by Bashar al-Assad last year in which he effectively pronounced a distinctly Syrian form of state-approved Islamic practice (see: [Syria Update 14 December 2020](#)), an initiative that arguably kicked off with the formation of the Damascus International Islamic Center for Countering Terrorism and Extremism (see: [Syria Update 23–29 May 2019](#)).

Implementers should be aware of trends in public religion in Syria. Religious organisations are often effective implementing partners, as they enjoy comparative freedom to manoeuvre. Further state influence over religious practice may impinge on that. In the long term, the move may revive debate over the shrinking of operational space in Syria.



05 AL-HASAKEH, SYRIA

## Head of the Iraqi Council for Refugees in al-Hol killed

On 13 November, an attack by suspected IS members at al-Hol camp [reportedly](#) killed two Iraqi refugees, including Abu Sultan al-Iraqi, President of the local Iraqi Council, and injured several others. Al-Iraqi reportedly [changed](#) locations twice to escape rising security threats. Two days later, an Iraqi woman in the camp was shot in the head. 78 people are known to have been [killed](#) in the camp since the start of 2021, 58 of whom are Iraqi. Notably, only a week ago, the SDF, supported by the international coalition, reportedly [thwarted an attack](#) on Sina'a prison in west Al-Hasakah city, which holds an estimated 5,000 alleged IS operatives (see: [Syria Update 15 November 2021](#)).

## Longer delays, more attacks

The events draw attention to the enduring risks at camps in northeast Syria. These risks are especially pertinent for Iraqi residents, who remain unable or unwilling to leave the camp, given the dangers they continue to face upon return to their home communities. Although al-Hol is viewed as a camp for IS affiliates, it is important to note that it hosts at least 10,000 Iraqis who fled IS's advances between 2016 and 2018. The SDF has called on the Iraqi government to repatriate its citizens from the camp. Although the Iraqi government agreed in 2018 to repatriate 5,000 of its non-IS affiliated nationals, only 868 have so far returned, while hundreds of Iraqi families who have passed an arduous security clearance are still waiting for their turn. Reasons behind the delayed repatriation remain unclear.



06 AL-HASAKEH, AR-RAQQA

## Furor Erupts over U.S. Plan to Send 3,000 Tonnes of Wheat Seed to Northern Syria

On 10 November, the U.S. Embassy in Damascus (operations suspended since 2012) [announced](#) that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will respond to farmers' requests by sending 3,000 metric tonnes of wheat seed to northeast Syria, in reference to territories controlled by the Autonomous Administration. In a 15 November statement, the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture [warned](#) farmers against using the U.S.-supplied seeds, noting that it is illegal and risks introducing a variety of pests, such as the wheat wart nematode, which could hamper wheat cultivation in the region. Also on 15 November, the U.S. Embassy published a post that skirted the ministry's claims, instead [stating](#) that the "high-quality seeds" would help "hundreds of farmers" produce around 32,000 tons of wheat next year. However, the head of the Autonomous Administration's Economy and Agriculture Committee, Salman Barudo, [stated](#) that the seeds will be held for testing before distribution.

## Sowing discontent

The row over the seeds is predictable and highly politicised in light of an active disinformation campaign waged by Damascus against such projects, and it raises considerations for "do no harm" and conflict-sensitivity risks. Outside technical experts reportedly [stated](#) any new seeds introduced to



the country pose some risk to wheat cultivation in all of Syria. They cite the need to test the seeds' suitability to the climate and soil of the region, as well as ensure they do not carry pests that could have a wider impact. The Syrian Government has stated that the Autonomous Administration lacks the proper facilities to test these seeds and assess whether they are harmful to Syrian wheat production. A mismatch could inadvertently aggravate the wheat shortage the seeds are meant to address. However, in the current case, the seeds are sourced regionally and they have been held for appropriate testing. Damascus has played up potential risks for political effect.

The issues raised prompt questions for other donors contemplating agriculture work in Syria beyond politics alone. Syria has a longstanding relationship with international and regional institutions which provide technical support to authorities and individual farmers in assessing wheat seed quality. For instance, the Arab Center for the Study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) remains at least semi-functional in the northeast. Several agricultural programmes present in the region provide seed inputs to farmers; however, the degree to which they engage with technical institutions or incorporate third-party expertise to assess seed quality varies widely from project to project. Large donors such as USAID would be well-placed to engage directly with technical institutions that can provide such support. By not engaging with such institutions, the introduction of these seeds poses a significant risk to the wheat agricultural sector in northern Syria, an area that has historically produced the majority of Syria's wheat. Implementing agencies should be aware of this reality and advise testing the seed for diseases and compatibility before planting the crops. Such engagement could also help dispel distrust sparked by Government messaging if it is well-documented, transparent, and adequately communicated to potential beneficiaries.

## 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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### Qatar Has No Plan to Normalise Ties with Syria: Foreign Minister

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**What does it say?** In a news conference with the U.S. Secretary of State, Qatar's Foreign Minister reiterated Doha's position opposing normalisation with the Syrian Government.

**Reading between the lines:** Qatar is responding to regional trends by publicly expressing its continued political alliance with the U.S. and Turkey on the Syrian file while safeguarding its role as a peacebuilder in the Arab region.

Source: [Al Jazeera](#)  
Language: English  
Date: 12 November 2021

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### The Syrian Government Reveals the Date Jordanian Electricity Is Set to Arrive

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**What does it say?** Syria's Minister of Electricity announced that the power line between Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon will be up and running by the end of 2021.

**Reading between the lines:** The Government of Syria has sought to cement its relationships with regional actors to attract investment, yet such deals have so far delivered little real progress.

Source: [Zaman Al Wasl](#)  
Language: Arabic  
Date: 15 November 2021

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### Expensive Private Schools Become Many Syrian Students' Only Option

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**What does it say?** The number of private schools in northwest Syria is increasing due to a dearth of public schools, facilities overcrowded by IDPs, and low-quality education.

**Reading between the lines:** The surge in the number of private schools in the northeast will increase inequality in access to education. Donors interested in investing in education in Syria should consider the disparities between public and private schools and work to provide higher-quality education to public school students.

Source: [Al-Monitor](#)  
Language: English  
Date: 15 November 2021

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### How the U.S. Hid an Airstrike That Killed Dozens of Civilians in Syria

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**What does it say?** A U.S. airstrike on IS territory in Syria targeted civilians, resulting in approximately 70 casualties.

**Reading between the lines:** Although the Baghuz strike was one of the largest civilian casualty incidents in the war against IS, it has never been publicly recognised by the U.S. military. The strike was ordered by the secretive Task Force 9, and was

likely brushed aside to avoid fuelling already-rising scepticism over the U.S. military role in Middle East conflicts.

Source: [New York Times](#)  
Language: English  
Date: 15 November 2021

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### Tribal Transformations in Dar'a since the Start of the Syrian War: Restraint Has its Price

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**What does it say?** Instead of actively supporting armed aggression against the regime, many Dar'a notables fled to neighbouring countries or remained silent — a potential misstep.

**Reading between the lines:** The neutral stance of traditional tribal leadership allowed for the rise of a new cadre of previously marginalised leaders with more individualistic tendencies, threatening tribal cohesion.

Source: [Raseef 22](#)  
Language: Arabic  
Date: 13 November 2021

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### Cham Wings Suspends Minsk Flights over Belarus Border Crisis and EU Sanction Threats

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**What does it say?** The sole private airline operator in Syria, Cham

Wings, has suspended flights to Minsk, Belarus, following threats of sanctions by the EU.

**Reading between the lines:** Cham Wings has been involved in many illicit activities during the conflict, which led to it being sanctioned by the U.S. Its current role in the fiasco along the Belarus-Poland border might elicit sanctions from the EU as well.

**Source:** Syria Report  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 16 November 2021

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## Lebanon medicine prices skyrocket as subsidies lifted

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**What does it say?** Cash-strapped Lebanon began to lift subsidies for essential medicine, pushing prices through the roof.

**Reading between the lines:** Lebanon's population has been rapidly descending into poverty since the financial crisis in 2019. Lifting subsidies on medicine will have severe consequences, especially as inflation continues uncurbed. The impact of this decision will also be felt in Syria.

**Source:** The National News  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 16 November 2021

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## The Vicious Cycle of “Prices, Merchants, and Consumer Protection”

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**What does it say?** The Government's arbitrary taxation of merchants inadvertently transferred the burden onto consumers by raising the prices of goods and services.

**Reading between the lines:** Syrians may suffer as access to affordable medicine in neighbouring Lebanon dries up. The public is paying the lion's share of the cost of Government-led economic recovery

strategies. Without serious wage reform and price control, the vicious cycle will continue.

**Source:** Al-Mashhad Online  
**Language:** Arabic  
**Date:** 15 November 2021

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## Syria: four new ministers added to EU sanctions list

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**What does it say?** Four recently-appointed ministers were added to the EU's restrictive measures list. The ministers will be banned from travelling, and their assets will be frozen.

**Reading between the lines:** The EU's restrictive measures will likely continue to target new Government cabinet members until an alternative political strategy is devised.

**Source:** Council of the EU  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 15 November 2021

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## Secret Document for Normalization of Ties with Damascus Includes Exit of Foreign Forces

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**What does it say?** A confidential Jordanian document proposes removing foreign forces and fighters from the country, while acknowledging Russia's legitimate interests.

**Reading between the lines:** Removing all foreign fighters from Syria would weaken any justification for continued Iranian military presence. Jordan has long been worried about rising Iranian influence along its northern borders. As always, implementing such a deal is far tougher than agreeing to it.

**Source:** Asharq Al-Awsat  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 12 November 2021

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## The UAE and Damascus: The Normalisation of the Syrian Regime

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**What does it say?** The Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates, the most senior Emirati official to visit Syria since 2011, met with President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on November 9, 2021.

**Reading between the lines:** This visit furthers the UAE's normalisation efforts between the countries and signals its intention to play a larger role in facilitating Syria's return to the Arab League and the international community.

**Source:** The Middle East Directions Programme (MEDirections)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 15 November 2021

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## Syria Receives Largest Batch of COVID-19 Vaccines under COVAX Sharing Scheme

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**What does it say?** Syria received over 1.3 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, the largest batch to arrive in the country via the COVAX facility since the first delivery in April.

**Reading between the lines:** Less than two percent of Syria's population have been fully vaccinated against the novel coronavirus. Despite the increased supply of vaccines, it remains doubtful that COVAX will reach its goal of vaccinating 20 percent of the population by the end of 2021.

**Source:** Syria Report  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 16 November 2021

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**Contact:**  
[syria-update@coar-global.org](mailto:syria-update@coar-global.org)



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