

# Syria Update

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A Syrian man loads wheat onto a truck. Syria's wheat production has collapsed, foreshadowing a risk of famine. Image courtesy of Enab Baladi.



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## Syria in 2022

Although conflict in Syria has slowed considerably, humanitarian needs continue to rise. Aid actors have struggled to adapt. To do so, they must recognise that the crisis in Syria is arguably undergoing a paradigm shift. This report, a forecast for the year 2022, offers guidance to aid actors seeking to move beyond outmoded emergency response approaches to achieve more substantive, lasting change.

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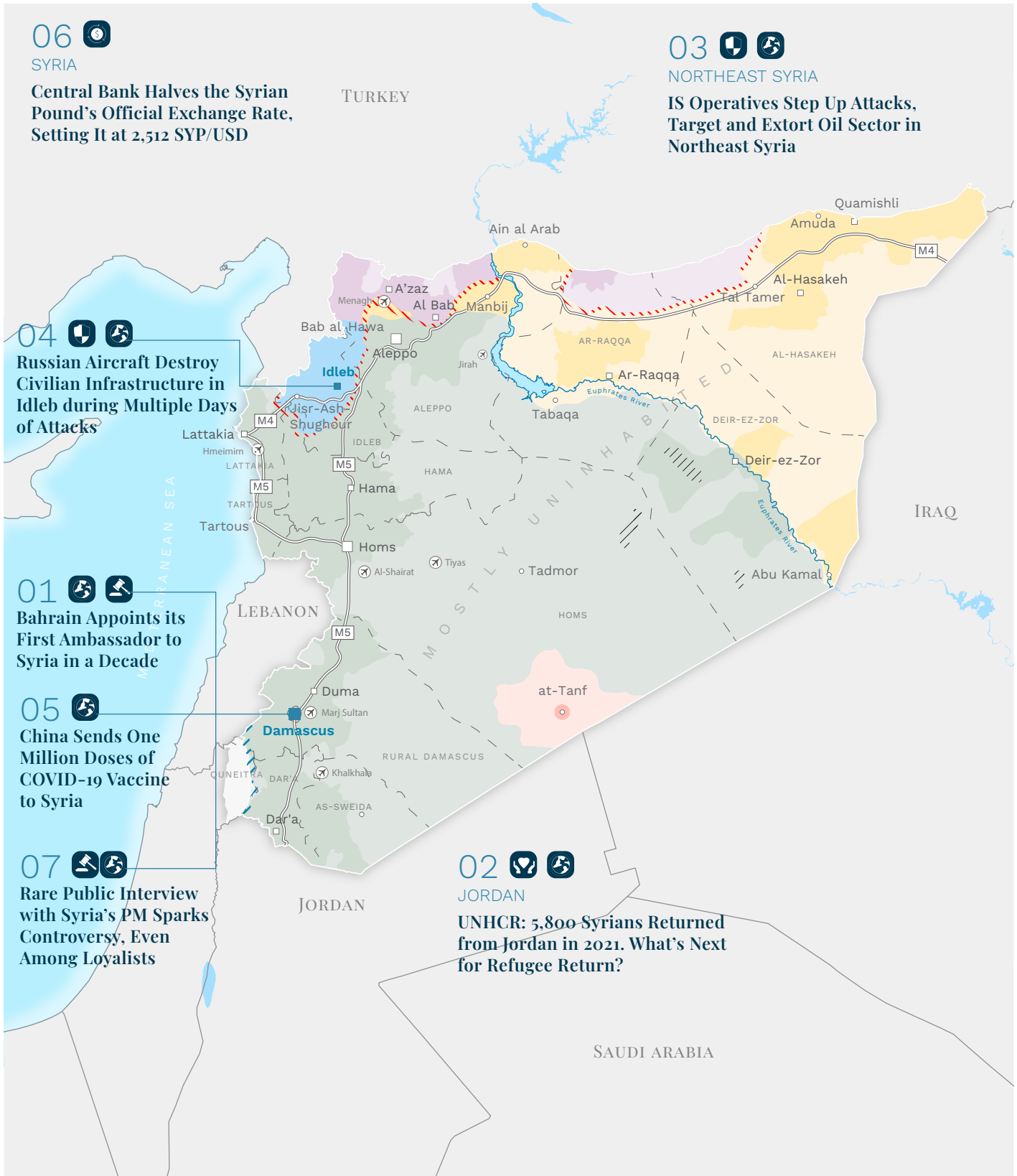
## WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST

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

On 17 December 2021, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published its special report on its crop assessment mission in which it estimated Syria's wheat production in 2021 as 1.05 million tonnes, a shortfall of just under 2 million tonnes based on projected needs and once projected imports and food assistance are taken into account. There is a bread crisis in all regions of Syria, as prices have gone up and production has declined, underpinning the broader cost-of-living crisis faced by Syrians and leading to long queues for subsidised bread in front of bakeries. With few policy tools to address the crisis, the Government of Syria has turned to imports: an unsustainable solution given the Government's limited foreign currency reserves. With poor harvests and limited means to compensate, the risk of famine in Syria is a significant humanitarian concern that will likely require the diversion of shrinking aid budgets to meet immediate food needs.

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

- On 30 December, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain appointed the nation's first ambassador to Syria since it downgraded its ties to Damascus at the beginning of the Syrian uprising. While the appointment of an ambassador suggests a step-change in relations between Bahrain and Syria, for now, there are hard limits on how far Arab states are willing to go in Syria.
- UNHCR data show that 5,800 Syrian refugees returned to Syria from Jordan in 2021. Given the scale and frozen nature of the refugee crisis in Syria, donors can and should rethink how they see long-term refugee issues, including the prospect of return.
- On 4 January, five Syrian Government soldiers were killed and 20 others injured when Islamic State (IS) militants launched an attack on an army transport bus in eastern the Syrian desert. Along with attempts to extort oil sector workers, the attack shows the group's staying power, showing that it is likely to pose a localised risk throughout 2022.
- In early January, Russian aircraft targeted multiple civilian sites in Idlib, including poultry farms, a foodstuffs factory, and a major water station. Such attacks are all-too familiar, and they show Moscow's dissatisfaction with the status quo, even if Russia remains hesitant to completely upend it.
- On 4 January, China donated one million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Syria. Western donor governments are concerned over China's outreach to Syria, including vaccine diplomacy. If they are to counter Beijing's influence, they must provide more jabs of their own instead.
- The Central Bank of Syria has officially halved the 'official' exchange rate of the Syrian pound, dropping it to 2,512 SYP/USD. The devaluation is a notable concession to reality, but it is unlikely to have a major direct impact on humanitarian operations, which use a different rate that is set separately.
- In a 3 January interview with state media, Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous deflected blame for Syria's woes and offered no concrete plans to improve conditions in the country. The interview began as an attempt at transparency, and ended as a fiasco, generating rare public criticism from Syrians who fear the state has no clear direction.



**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
  - US-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 December 2021, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations published a [special report](#) on its crop assessment in which it estimated Syria's wheat production in 2021 as 1.05 million tonnes, compared to 2.8 million tonnes in 2020 and an average of 4.1 million tonnes in the years before the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. Wheat is a vital input for bread, a dietary staple in Syria, and the collapse in grain production foreshadows a risk of famine, as nearly 60 percent of Syria's population (12.4 million people) are already food insecure, [according to the World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#). Once projected government imports and food assistance are taken into account, the FAO estimates a shortfall of just under 2 million tonnes of wheat and just over 2 million tonnes of barley for the country between July 2021 and June 2022.<sup>1</sup>

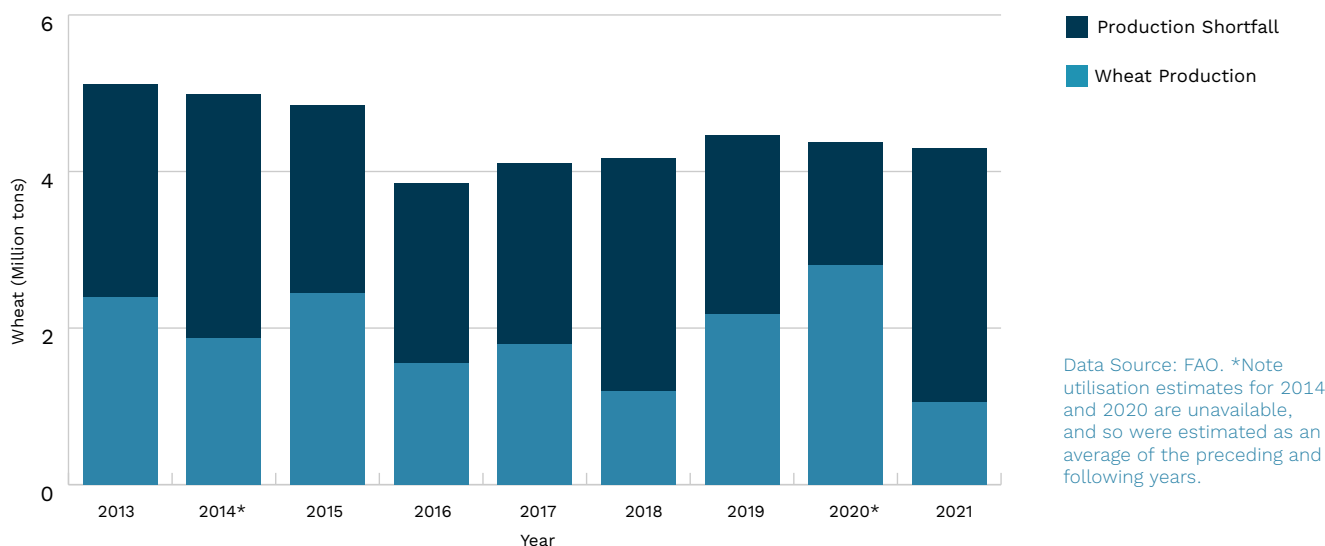
While the immediate cause of [poor harvests](#) is the fact that Syria is currently facing one of the [worst droughts](#) in living memory, wider economic crises in Syria and its neighbour-

ing countries have compounded issues of food insecurity and production. Fertilisers, seeds, and herbicides are in low supply, with high prices and mediocre quality. The fuel required for mechanised agriculture and water-pump irrigation is also scarce and expensive, while machinery and other necessary infrastructure are dated, damaged, and costly to repair. Government investment in the agriculture sector has declined significantly, previous years' campaigns to boost wheat planting have faltered, and the state's limited financial capacity means it will struggle to make up for production shortfalls through imports.

### Lacking the tools to manage the crisis, Damascus turns to imports

In an attempt to encourage the production of wheat and secure supplies for the Government, Syrian Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform Mohammed Hassan Qatna increased the price of wheat purchased from farmers to 1,500 SYP per kilogram for this year, up from 900 SYP. The increased revenues may help to stem the liquidity crisis

## Wheat Production Compared to Estimated Utilisation



<sup>1</sup> In the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration, the shortfall is [estimated at](#) around 300,000-400,000 tonnes.

facing farmers, which has left them unable to service their crops. It is unclear, however, whether the increase will be sufficient in a context of rampant input price inflation. Moreover, increased crop prices will do nothing about the decline in arable land and widespread water shortages, exacerbated in the short term by drought, but already facing long-term problems due to conflict and mismanagement. Furthermore, most of Syria's agricultural production is located in areas outside of Government of Syria-control, exacerbating supply issues to the majority of those inside Syria.

With production at home stifled, the Government of Syria has turned to imports from Russia, with which it secured [an agreement](#) to import one million tonnes of wheat at the end of 2021, financed through a Russian loan. With limited foreign currency reserves, however, the Government of Syria will be unable to afford imports to the degree needed to fully make up the production shortfall, and it is unclear how it will repay such loans, either this crop year or in the future.

### Declining quality, too

There is already a bread crisis in [all regions](#) of Syria, as prices have gone up and production has declined, underpinning at the most basic level the broader cost-of-living crisis faced by Syrians and leading to long queues for subsidised bread. Without sufficient good quality raw materials, the bread produced by Government bakeries is reportedly of low quality, as well as low quantity. The currency crisis in Turkey has led to bread price increases in opposition-held areas of north-west Syria, leading to protest (see: [Syria Update 6 December 2021](#)), while Lebanon's economic crisis has cut off fuel and investment lifelines for Syria.

In Syria's northeast, the Autonomous Administration has said that flour being used in bakeries is currently up to 20 per cent yellow corn flour, a necessity to avoid bread shortages due to a lack of wheat flour. The Autonomous Administration raised the sticker price of a bundle of bread, weighing 1.25 kilograms, to 300 SYP in December 2021, a few months after the previous increase to 250 SYP. Towards the end of 2021, USAID sent [3,000 tonnes](#) of wheat seed to northeast Syria. The area has historically been Syria's breadbasket, but is facing similar drought- and conflict-related production issues to the rest of the country. Climate change is not the only man-made issue the region must face. The American

distribution faced a concerted disinformation campaign by Damascus-aligned actors, evidence of the increasing politicisation of wheat, which has long been a strategic resource in the conflict in Syria (see: [Syria Update 22 November 2021](#)).

### Implications for the aid community

With poor harvests and limited means to compensate, the risk of famine in Syria is a significant humanitarian concern. In its report, FAO called for immediate, emergency action to support the agricultural sector in Syria, with vouchers for the purchase of inputs, sufficient supplies of fuel, and food assistance for agricultural households that have lost their crop. The need for food aid will likely increase significantly, with WFP and other aid agencies already struggling to meet the urgent needs of millions of Syrians due to funding shortfalls. In the short term, shrinking aid budgets will likely require re-budgeting to meet growing immediate humanitarian needs.

In the context of climate change and the risk of increasingly frequent, and severe, droughts, a longer-term focus on building resilience in the Syrian agricultural sector will also be required. Recent developments afford donors an opportunity to work in this regard. Since November 2021, US sanctions targeting Syria have loosened (see: [Syria Update 6 December 2021](#)). Updated general licenses now allow for the refurbishment of agricultural infrastructure and food production and storage facilities, such as mills, bakeries, and grain silos. In parallel, the push for early recovery assistance encourages resilience-focused work in supporting infrastructure for agriculture. These two channels enable humanitarian work to combat food insecurity, and donors should be aware of this possibility. Nevertheless, a long-term view is needed. Crop production shortfalls are closely linked to the wider deterioration of the Syrian economy. Without stabilisation of the broader economy, including access to fuel and key agricultural inputs, improvement in nationwide mobility and transport, clearer sanctions relief, and a more investment-friendly business climate, Syrian food production is likely to remain in a significant deficit.

## WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



## 01 DAMASCUS

## Bahrain Appoints its First Ambassador to Syria in a Decade

On 30 December, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain [appointed](#) the nation's first ambassador to Syria since it downgraded its ties to Damascus at the beginning of the Syrian uprising. Bahrain reopened its embassy in Syria in 2018, but had not appointed an ambassador-level representative until now. It follows other Gulf states in this respect, as Oman [reinstated](#) its ambassador in Damascus in October 2020. Manama's decision to upgrade ties with Damascus also comes after two other Arab states – Jordan and the UAE – have made limited but directed steps to break Syria's international isolation.

### Hard choices

On its face, the appointment of an ambassador suggests a step-change in relations between Syria and yet another Arab neighbour. Yet, it is important to place the development in the context of Gulf regional affairs, which have seemingly split over the issue of normalisation with Syria. Bahrain's foreign policy has seldom diverged widely from that of other GCC states, particularly the UAE, arguably one of the leaders in re-engagement with Damascus. For instance, [Bahrain followed](#) the UAE by normalising diplomatic ties with Israel following the signing of the Abraham Accords in August 2020. However, Bahrain is seemingly at odds with other close regional partners on Syria, as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have recently reaffirmed [anti-Assad positions](#).

All told, the second half of 2021 offered a welcoming political climate for re-engagement with Syria. However, there are good reasons to doubt regional states will fully normalise relations to their – or Damascus's – satisfaction as long as sanctions make engagement with Damascus risky (see: [Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis](#)). Nonetheless, regional states have a pragmatic incentive to mend ties with Damascus, whatever their past reservations. Most obviously, they are fated by geography to somehow work with or through Syria on regional issues. It is unclear to what extent Manama's re-engagement with Damascus is driven by economic self-interest, a key factor in thawing regional relations with Syria, as seen in the case of Jordan. On 4 January, Jordan [participated](#) in a trade fair in Damascus, making good on cooperation agreements for economic and commercial ties signed between the two countries in July 2021. These include the opening of Nasib border crossing in a bid to boost trade through the pivotal regional

crossing (see: [Syria Update 30 August 2022](#)). How, when, and indeed whether more substantive moves will be made remains to be seen. Some Arab states, including the UAE, seek to check Iran's arc of political and military influence, to which Syria is fundamental (see: [Syria Update 15 November 2021](#)). By offering alternative options to Assad's decade-long predicament, these countries hope to wean Damascus off Tehran.



## 02 JORDAN

## UNHCR: 5,800 Syrians Returned from Jordan in 2021. What's Next for Refugee Return?

On 2 January 2022, Jordanian [media sources](#) citing United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures reported that approximately 5,800 Syrian refugees returned to Syria from Jordan in 2021. Another 3,990 refugees left Jordan for resettlement in third countries such as Australia, Germany, Canada, France, Norway, Ireland, Sweden, the UK, and the US. Jordan has one of the largest populations of Syrian refugees, hosting around 670,000. Of Syria's neighbours, only Lebanon (with an estimated [1.5 million](#) registered and unregistered refugees) and Turkey (with around [3.7 million refugees](#)) host more.

### Rethinking returns

The small scale of returns from Jordan is characteristic of the returns situation in Syria generally. The Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) estimates that, through November (its December datasets have not been published), fewer than 10,000 Syrians returned from abroad in 2021. The month of May witnessed a mere 74 returns. It may be time for donors and aid implementers to rethink how they conceive of returns and implement in support of Syrian refugees, particularly those who have spent significant portions of the ongoing crisis in countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, where so-called durable solutions are particularly elusive (see: [Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis](#)). One place to begin: monitoring frameworks have seldom advanced beyond a numbers-based analysis. It would serve donors and implementers alike to have a more nuanced understanding of the status of the many Syrians who will remain shut out of their country even if, or when, a presumed resolution to the conflict is reached. Recent history is replete with examples of refugee crises that have dragged on for generations without resolution. Such examples behave the aid response to think, and act, strategically.



### 03 NORTHEAST SYRIA

## IS Operatives Step Up Attacks, Target and Extort Oil Sector in Northeast Syria

On 4 January, media sources [reported](#) that five Syrian Government soldiers were killed and 20 others injured when Islamic State (IS) militants launched a missile attack on an army transport bus on the Palmyra-Deir-ez-Zor road in the Badia desert. On the same day, IS also claimed responsibility for an attack on a checkpoint controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the eastern province of Deir-ez-Zor. The SDF confirmed the attack but said no casualties were recorded. These incidents, though relatively common, followed a seeming escalation by the group in late December. On 15 December, media sources [reported](#) that IS militants stormed the SDF-held Subaihan oil field along the Euphrates River southeast of Al Mayadin and threatened to kill the workers if local “investors” did not pay a levy amounting to roughly 20 percent of the field’s oil production.

### Defeated, but still a risk

Nearly three years since the territorial defeat of IS in March 2019, militants affiliated with the group remain capable of launching attacks in eastern Syria. Targeting the oil sector and extorting businesspeople are relatively bold steps, however, and they show that the group is increasingly confident, as its fighters seek more ambitious sources of income. On 29 October 2021, local media [reported](#) that IS fighters also stormed the Abu Habba oil field in the northern countryside of Deir-ez-Zor, after oil investors refused to pay them a share of the field’s output. IS claimed it had [burned](#) the Daas oil well on 2 January, after an investor it contacted refused to pay a \$15,000 royalty. Other attacks by IS affiliates targeting oil fields or worker convoys took place elsewhere in the closing months of 2021. A spokesman for the International Coalition reportedly [stated](#) that despite such attacks, IS is weak in the areas where the coalition and its partners are present, although the group continues to use intimidation tactics to extort and rob civilians, endangering local security forces.

Such events also call into question the SDF’s legitimacy in oil-rich areas where its social base is weak, as its presence is justified in large part by its capacity to quash IS and prevent its resurgence. The underlying socio-political conditions that drove IS’s emergence in the first place remain largely unaddressed, with economic deprivation, poor governance, and perceived heavy-handed security operations fuelling grievances. IS fighters retain the capacity to operate in the desert, carrying out hit-and-run attacks. All told, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) [reported](#) that at least

600 people in Syria were killed in dozens of IS attacks in 2021. In 2022, the group is likely to remain a security challenge for the SDF, the Syrian Government, and civilian populations in the pockets of eastern Syria where IS militants continue to operate, seemingly unchecked.



### 04 IDEB

## Russian Aircraft Destroy Civilian Infrastructure in Idleb during Multiple Days of Attacks

On 4 January, Syrian Civil Defence, commonly known as the White Helmets, [published a tweet](#) showing evidence that Russian warplanes had targeted poultry farms, a foodstuffs factory, and — mostly notably — a water station that supplies thousands of people in Idleb, [leaving them waterless](#). Russian aerial attacks struck targets across Idleb on [multiple consecutive days](#). A woman and her child were wounded in one of the attacks on a farm in the outskirts of the town of Kafr Takharim. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported that the [poultry farm](#) and [al-Arshani water station](#) were free of any military presence or equipment that would have presented legitimate military targets.

### Violence for the sake of leverage

The attacks, particularly those targeting the water station, have generated intense public outcry among Syrians. In general, Russia has employed violence and targeted civilian infrastructure to achieve political gains and put pressure on Turkey and Western states, which are concerned with the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria. Among Syrians in the northwest, it has been noted that the string of attacks coincides with the end of the initial six-month mandate for the mechanism for bringing humanitarian aid into Syria under Resolution 2585 (see: [Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis](#)). Russia may be seeking to pressure the international community to accept limiting the mechanism to sending aid via Damascus, and to condone Russia’s keenness to facilitate early recovery work. It is also seeking to demoralise the residents of opposition-held areas through scorched earth tactics.

In direct terms, Russian attacks may also be aimed at impelling Turkey to fulfil its commitments under the March 2020 agreement to pause major violence in the region (see: [Syria Update 9 March 2020](#)). Re-affirmed in subsequent Nur-Sultan

(Astana) forums, the agreement stipulates the elimination of radical groups, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and the creation of a buffer zone along the M4 highway. Idleb remains a key faultline in the relationship between Turkey and Russia, representing their conflicting objectives in Syria, although since the 2020 agreement it has not seen the same risk of open military confrontation between the two sides. It should be noted that Erdogan is the first foreign leader with whom Putin spoke in 2022 when, on 2 January, the two leaders had a [phone call](#) to discuss the South Caucasus, Syria, and Libya, as well as “Russia’s proposals on legally binding security guarantees” — a possible reference to overlapping interests in Syria. The road to Idleb runs through Ankara and Moscow, and aid implementers should closely monitor developments in Russian-Turkish relations as these will have implications for access, capacities, and security in the governorate. Ultimately, violence in the region is likely to continue, and it is designed to reinforce the view among Syrians in Idleb that even if they do not face renewed major military operations at this time, the area is anything but safe.



## 05 DAMASCUS

### China Sends One Million Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine to Syria

On 4 January, [media sources](#) reported that China had sent one million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Syria. According to the Syrian state media, [SANA](#), this is the fourth time that China has sent vaccines to the country. Health Minister Hassan al-Ghabash characterised the donation as an effort by China to “enhance and maintain relations with Syria.” Quoting China’s ambassador to Syria, SANA reported, “some western countries don’t support efforts exerted to deliver vaccines to all countries, a thing that caused a gap in the coverage level on the international area” [sic]. Presumably, the vaccines are of Chinese manufacture, as were previous vaccine donations from Beijing.

#### Beyond vaccine politics

From the perspective of Syrian public health, the donation is an unambiguous positive development, irrespective of justified concerns over any vaccine’s effectiveness against emerging COVID-19 variants. Nonetheless, Western donor governments and critics of Damascus have fixated on the competitive political aspect of China’s vaccine diplomacy in Syria. By some accounts, such donations telegraph Beijing’s hopes of making political, social, and diplomatic inroads

for future investment in the country. Despite overtures towards Syria, China has, in the main, been a marginal actor on the sidelines of the conflict. On the top level, Beijing has limited itself to UN Security Council votes that largely shadow Russia’s, and it is unlikely to emerge as a key investment player unless Syria stabilises in a way to meet its conservative threshold for geopolitical stability. As for Syrian public health, the proportion of Syrians vaccinated against COVID-19 remains in the low single digits. For the time being, the internationally supported COVAX facility has provided some vaccine donations to Syria, including donations by [Sweden](#) and [Japan](#). Yet on the whole, Western vaccines have not been forthcoming. As a result, Syrians do not have the luxury to pick and choose which vaccine they will take. If the international community is averse to the optics of Chinese vaccine diplomacy in Syria, its members should provide more jabs of their own instead.



## 06 SYRIA

### Central Bank Halves the Syrian Pound’s Official Exchange Rate, Setting It at 2,512 SYP/USD

On 3 January, the Central Bank of Syria [set](#) the official conversion rate for the Syrian pound at 2,512 SYP/USD, raising it from 1,256 SYP/USD. The change effectively halves the value of the Syrian pound against foreign currencies. The move affects official state transactions, including budgetary calculations and bank operations. Humanitarian activities, however, operate according to a separate pegged conversion rate that is set independently. Importers also work according to a separate rate.

#### One rate among many

The official exchange rate is rarely used in practice, and the pound’s ‘official’ devaluation is unlikely to have a significant impact on living conditions and humanitarian operations. The Central Bank of Syria has created a choose-your-own-adventure exchange scheme, using different rates for Government transactions, imports, and humanitarian affairs in a bid to mitigate its losses without significantly altering fiscal policy. [Banks](#), [remittances](#), international organisations and military [conscription waivers](#) all already operate at the 2,512 rate, others that are practically identical. Moreover, importers have been able to [buy](#) foreign currency from Government-approved money transfer agencies at rough parity with market rates from [April 2021](#). Nonetheless, the most



important conversion rate for Syrian consumers is arguably the market exchange rate, which is largely outside the state's control, given its limited reserves and meagre tools to manage fiscal policy. Fluctuations in this rate contribute to shortages of goods and fuel, driving service shortfalls. Real estate [valuations](#) and prices of consumer products have largely been denominated in black market rates. The currency devaluation will therefore have little impact on Syrians' rapidly deteriorating living conditions, and aid actors inside Government-controlled territories should see limited direct impact on their operations, which are calculated according to the humanitarian rate.

### Why now?

The Central Bank of Syria gave no reason for the devaluation. The measure took effect shortly after the Government of Syria finalised its latest state budget. The rate change cuts in half — to 5.3 billion USD — the sticker price, in dollars, of the budget. It [has been suggested](#) that the devaluation was timed to avoid the embarrassing optics of a small budget. However, it is worth noting that the real value of the budget is approximately 3.8 billion USD, as per the black market rate of [3,580 SYP/USD](#). Ultimately, the move brings the official exchange rate into closer alignment with the market, but the Government of Syria will struggle to keep up.



## 07 DAMASCUS

### Rare Public Interview with Syria's PM Sparks Controversy, Even Among Loyalists

On 3 January, Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous participated in a rare public [interview](#) with the state-owned media outlets Syrian TV and Al-Ekhbariya TV and Radio. In an interview that was meant to focus on the state's approach to the year ahead, Arnous deflected blame for declining services in oil derivatives and electricity, claiming that at least 60 percent of Syria's power stations and transmission lines were destroyed in the conflict. He further attributed the shortage in petroleum products to the US occupation forces which are sited near Syria's most productive oil and gas wells in the northeast. According to Arnous, the Government plans to cancel 333,000 subsidy cards out of 4 million, allocating the savings to improving salaries instead. He noted that this does not signal an abandonment of Syria's subsidisation strategy. Speaking about currency fluctuation and without

offering a concrete plan, Arnous stated that the Government is determined to stabilise the exchange rate of the Syrian pound against foreign currencies, again blaming the war and sanctions for the current situation.

### An attempt at transparency ends in fiasco

The interview marks an attempt by the Government of Syria to demonstrate transparency, with the prime minister for the first time speaking about achievements during the previous year and plans for the new year. However, critics have complained vocally that the interview provided only stock-in-trade responses and time-worn Government rhetoric. Arnous failed to provide a clear plan for 2022 and evaded responsibility by blaming Syria's endemic problems the usual bugbears of Damascus: 'terrorism', the war, and sanctions. In a rare fit of pique, members of the public, including some Government loyalists, singled out the media outlets that hosted the interview for asking uncritical questions. Donor governments sometimes look to such interviews for signs of upcoming policy changes or evidence that officials are willing to make pragmatic concessions. In the case of Arnous, no such signals are forthcoming. For better or worse, Damascus has chosen a course and state rhetoric is fixed, despite the soft criticism of Syrians demanding pragmatic outcomes, not dogmatic positions.

## 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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### The Salvation Government is working to issue identity cards to the residents of northern Syria

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**What does it say?** Salvation Government Prime Minister, Ali Keda, has said that his government will work to improve service quality in Idlib, including through training courses for the police and judiciary, and increasing the number of hospitals in the region.

**Reading between the lines:** The Salvation Government is seeking to build popular legitimacy for its rule in Idlib, but limited capacities, economic crisis, and the enduring risk of conflict mean that it is likely to continue to rely on force to crush opposition.

**Source:** Enab Baladi  
**Language:** Arabic  
**Date:** 4 January 2022

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### SDF handed over 331 women and children from al-Hol and al-Roj camps to their countries in 2021

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**What does it say?** Syrian Democratic Forces handed over women and children said to be IS families to delegations from Uzbekistan, Russia, Canada, and some European countries. Over 43,000 foreign prisoners remain in SDF-controlled prisons.

**Reading between the lines:** The SDF has often called for support over the management of IS detainees and facilitation of their return to their countries of origin, as overcrowded camps and prisons remain fertile ground for IS radicalisation.

**Source:** Syria TV  
**Language:** Arabic  
**Date:** 29 December 2021

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### The Beginnings of Rezoning in Azaz

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**What does it say?** The Azaz local council and the opposition Syrian National Army began demolition operations in the city to address the growing problem of “building violations” in reference to housing units built without formal approval.

**Reading between the lines:** The spread of informal housing is an issue reported all over Syria, following the huge waves of displacement caused by the war. Dealing with the issue will be difficult, however, due to the interests of powerful local landowners, many of whom have links to influential armed factions.

**Source:** The Syria Report  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 4 January 2022

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## Former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria seeks to soften its brand

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**What does it say?** HTS, the ruling group in Idlib, is seeking to soften its image through side-lining radical figures and providing better governance. It is characterised by pragmatism and has undergone something of a transformation, or rebranding, from radical jihadi movement to fledgling government.

**Reading between the lines:** The goal of HTS is to ensure its survival and book a seat in the future Syria by making itself irreplaceable. With strong economic headwinds and a humanitarian crisis in its territories, however, it is reliant on authoritarian rule to maintain control.

**Source:** [Washington Post](#)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 2 January 2022

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## US-Led Coalition Responds to New Round of Attacks in Syria, Iraq

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**What does it say?** The US-led coalition accused Iranian-backed militias of firing rockets at Green Village, a base in northeast Syria hosting coalition troops. Coalition forces responded by firing artillery at the launch site, near the town of Al Mayadin.

**Reading between the lines:** While there appears to be an uptick in the activity of Iran-aligned militias targeting the US, in both Iraq and Syria, it is unclear at this point whether it is linked to the two-year anniversary of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. It shows, however, that both countries are a shared battlefield for US and Iranian interests.

**Source:** [VOA News](#)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 5 January 2022

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## Barrage of rockets: Turkish forces and national army shell Tel Tamr countryside amid new civilian exodus

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**What does it say?** Intensive artillery fire by Turkish and aligned forces on the Tal Tamr countryside has led to displacement, but no casualties.

**Reading between the lines:** Continued Turkish bombardment is a reminder that, although seemingly off the cards for now, the previously mooted invasion of areas in Kurdish-held northeast Syria remains a threat.

**Source:** [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 3 January 2022

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## Syrian official slams Russia for ‘silence’ over alleged Israeli strikes

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**What does it say?** Unnamed Syrian Government officials voice criticism over Russia’s failure to respond to or retaliate against Israeli airstrikes in Syria.

**Reading between the lines:** Frustration over Russia’s inaction is likely to continue within Syrian Government ranks; however, it is unlikely to cause significant ruptures in relations between Damascus and Moscow.

**Source:** [Jewish News Syndicate](#)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 4 January 2022

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