

Syria Update

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

UN Extends Cross-Border Mechanism for Six Months. Big Changes Will Follow

Autonomous Administration Threatens NGOs over Staff Salaries, Reviving Tax Debate

Pressuring aid workers is part of a wider campaign to increase tax revenues. Pg 8

Government Delegation Vows to Buy Lattakia's Citrus Crop to Mitigate Crisis

However, the response consists only of short-term policies that do not address the structural, economic, and environmental problems faced by the industry. Pg 8

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW

In Open Letter, US Congressmen Urge Biden to Adopt Hard-line Stand on Syria

Despite publicity, the letter does not signal a hardline tack in US Syria policy Pg 6

Three Turkish Soldiers Killed in Tell Abiad, Prompting Retaliation and Threats

Retaliatory strikes kill 22; Turkish Defence Minister says operations will escalate. Pg 7

Autonomous Administration Cracks Down on Service-Related Protests, Dismisses 43 Employees

SDF areas continue to witness protests due to declining economic conditions, poor services, and forced recruitment. Pg 6

HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Inaugurates Aleppo-Bab al-Hawa Road

HTS opens a new road in Idlib to boost local economy. Pg 7

Fatah Secretary Reiterates Support for Syria's Return to the Arab League

Damascus has seized on Rajoub's remarks to strengthen its narrative around increasing support for normalisation. Pg 9

A truck passes through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, 33 km north of Idlib. Bab al-Hawa is the only crossing point left of the UN cross-border response, and the lifeline for 3.4 million people in Syria's northwest. Image courtesy of NPA.



WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST



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.

[READ MORE](#)



The Future of LGBTQ+ Syria and the Aid Response

LGBTQ+ Syrians face specific challenges, including healthcare disparities, legal discrimination, social prejudice, and the aid sector's unpreparedness to meet resulting needs. This report explores regional case studies to identify programming opportunities and entry points to meet these needs and empower and support LGBTQ+ Syrians.

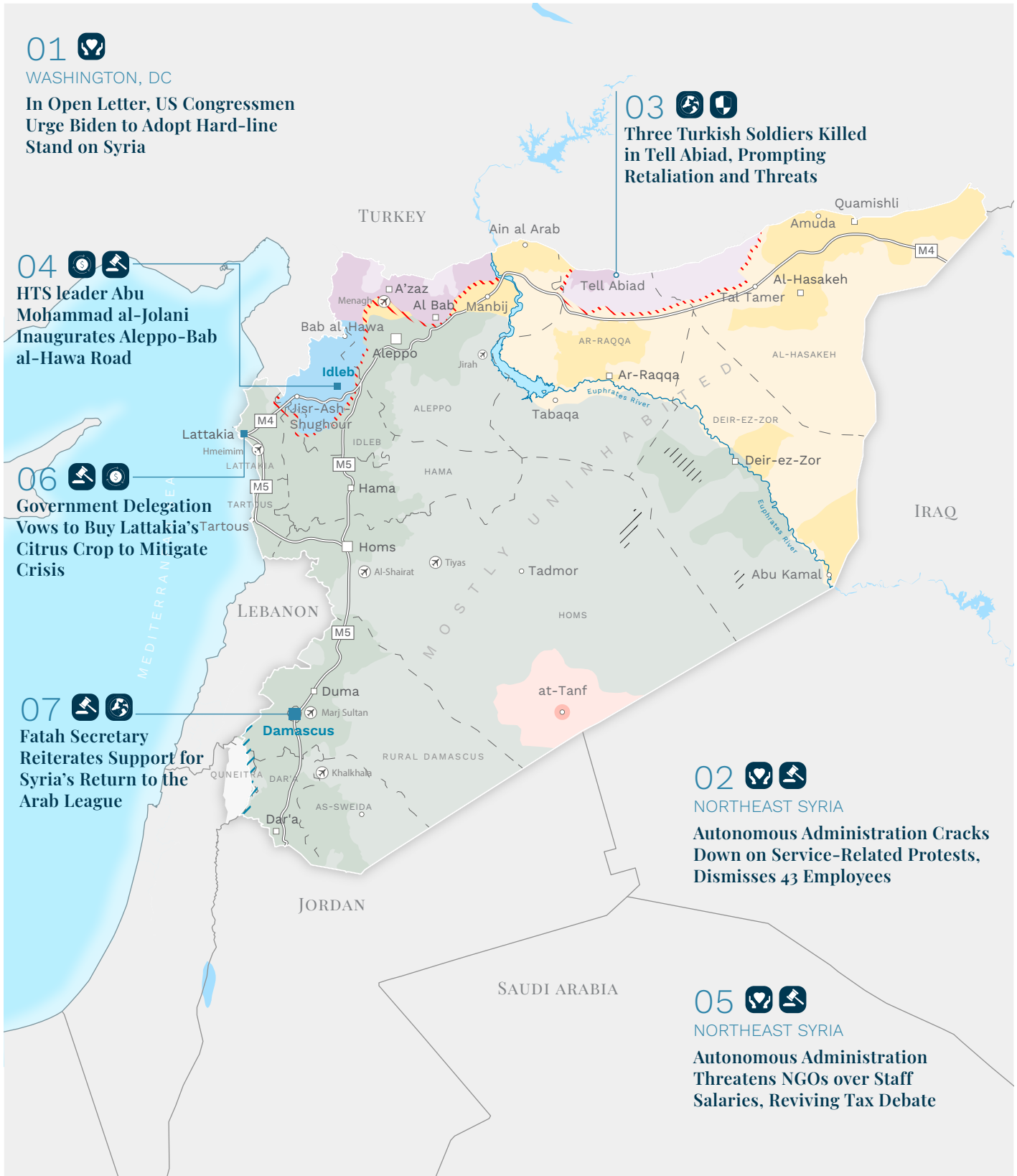
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The following is a brief synopsis of the *In-Depth Analysis* section:

On 10 January, the UN extended the cross-border mandate contained in Security Council Resolution 2585 for six months, despite earlier objections voiced by Russia. Though the mechanism is safe for now, a fight in July 2022 is all but unavoidable. Moscow's objections set up a scenario in which the current UN cross-border system is unlikely to survive in its current form without, to some extent, the greater support for early recovery action that Moscow has demanded. If so, the next six months may be a period of decisive transition in the Syria crisis response, potentially bringing about the end of the current cross border system or requiring a more robust progression toward early recovery. Whatever the outcome, substantial changes to the way aid is delivered are underway, and further adaptation is likely.

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

- 01 On 11 January, four US Congressmen published an open letter to President Biden urging a hardline stand against Bashar al-Assad and warning of creeping normalisation. Although the letter reverberated in the Syria policy community, it is unlikely to presage any significant shift in US policy, impede regional rapprochement with Damascus, or change the Syria programming context.
- 02 On 10 January, at least three civilians were wounded when the SDF fired on a crowd of approximately 100 protesters demonstrating against fuel and bread shortages in al-Suwaydiyah village, in western Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Such incidents highlight the Autonomous Administration's strained community relations and the risk to donors operating in close cooperation with it.
- 03 On 8 January, three Turkish soldiers were killed in an explosion near a border post in northern Ar-Raqqa Governorate, prompting Turkey to launch retaliatory operations that reportedly killed 22 members of the YPG and PKK and to threaten further "punitive operations." Although Ankara has seemingly backed down on its threat of a renewed incursion into northeast Syria, violent flare-ups are expected to continue, and instability in border regions will continue to drive humanitarian needs.
- 04 On 7 January, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani inaugurated the Aleppo-Bab al-Hawa road in Sarmada and promised future economic prosperity for Idlib. Despite the project's limited impact, the event shows al-Jolani's decisive shift from military toward civilian affairs, as he signals to the local and international community that he offers stability in times of war and good governance in times of peace.
- 05 The Autonomous Administration has renewed demands for local and international NGOs operating to disclose information about their staff, including salaries. Such demands have been shallowly justified on security and good governance grounds, but aid actors fear income tax implications and a campaign by authorities to control the aid environment.
- 06 On 12 January, a delegation headed by Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous visited Lattakia and offered to subsidise citrus producers, a key constituency that has lost market access due to dashed expectations of exporting to Russia and Iraq. However, without clear policy approaches and absent fixes to the structural problems in the Syrian economy, such problems are likely to recur.
- 07 On 10 January, the Fatah movement's secretary, Jibril Rajoub, denounced Syria's exclusion from the Arab League and signalled an upcoming visit by the Palestinian President. The statements constitute yet another push towards normalisation with Damascus, but denote little change in the broader relationship between the two governments.



01

WASHINGTON, DC
In Open Letter, US Congressmen Urge Biden to Adopt Hard-line Stand on Syria

03

Three Turkish Soldiers Killed in Tell Abiad, Prompting Retaliation and Threats

04

HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Inaugurates Aleppo-Bab al-Hawa Road

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Government Delegation Vows to Buy Lattakia's Citrus Crop to Mitigate Crisis

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Fatah Secretary Reiterates Support for Syria's Return to the Arab League

02

NORTHEAST SYRIA
Autonomous Administration Cracks Down on Service-Related Protests, Dismisses 43 Employees

05

NORTHEAST SYRIA
Autonomous Administration Threatens NGOs over Staff Salaries, Reviving Tax Debate

Population Density

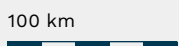
- Major city (750,000+)
- City (100,000+)
- Town (25,000+)
- Governorate
- Military airbase

Territorial Control

- 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 10 January, the UN sidestepped a potential crisis for the Syria aid response and agreed, without a contentious Security Council vote, to extend the mandate of the cross-border mechanism until 10 July 2022. Although it is unlikely the mechanism was at serious risk of lapsing, donor governments had braced for a fight over the mandate's final six-month period. Leading up to the vote, Russia vocally objected to the way a predominantly Western-funded aid response has implemented the compromises that secured its renewal in summer 2021, via Resolution 2585 (see: [Syria Update July 12, 2021](#)). Aid responders in Syria have deferred a difficult reckoning, but they have not altogether dodged it.

The stage is now set for an unavoidable battle over the fundamental architecture and scope of the crisis response in Syria when the current mandate expires in July (see: [Syria Update 20 December 2021](#)). Renewal negotiations may prompt wholesale changes not only to the cross-border mechanism, but to the wider response. Russia has consistently threatened to veto renewal of the cross-border system if its demands are not met. Among other things, the Kremlin has urged greater emphasis on cross-line convoys and more transparency and regular reporting from the UN. Yet, these factors are arguably less important than its demand for greater investment in early recovery activities. Donor governments are on the horns of a dilemma. Aid actors may need to demonstrate progress on early recovery programming, or face the real risk that Russia will carry out its threats to veto the cross-border mechanism once and for all. Either outcome would force the aid response to adapt, and July 2022 may constitute a decisive inflection point in the way aid activities are carried out in Syria (see: [Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis](#)).

Kicking the can down the road

Resolution 2585, which was unanimously adopted in July 2021, preserved access through Idleb's Bab al-Hawa, the only crossing point left of a once-robust UN cross-border response, and the lifeline for 3.4 million people in Syria's northwest. Its extension was conditional upon the submission of a "substantive report" by the UN Secretary General, which was submitted on 15 December 2021. The report assessed three key areas: 1) humanitarian need, monitoring,

and transparency of UN operations in Syria; 2) progress of cross-line operations in meeting needs; and 3) the UN's embrace of early recovery activities. It concluded, as donors, implementers, and the UN itself have repeatedly stated, that "cross-line convoys will not be able to replicate the size and scope of the cross-border operation."

As of writing, only two UN cross-line convoys have taken place since Resolution 2585 was passed (see: [Syria Update 20 December 2021](#)). The glacial pace of building up a cross-line convoy system highlights several realities. Among them is the difficulty of access negotiations that involve areas held by competing parties to the conflict. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which controls opposition-held Idleb, has militated against cross-line delivery, seeing it as a first step toward the elimination of the cross-border system. Aid instrumentalisation concerns are also pronounced. Russia hopes to reroute aid and donor funds through Damascus-based UN agencies, reviving discussion of the myriad ways cross-line deliveries have been weaponised by the Government of Syria to extract military gains and punish communities that rose up against Damascus.

New paradigm for the Syria response

Provided that Russia is willing to carry out its veto threat, the aid response will either be compelled to engage in greater support for early recovery programming, or to operate without a cross-border mechanism. Donors likely cannot insist on keeping the latter without providing the former. This risk compels aid actors to prioritise efforts to ensure a viable alternative to the UN-led cross-border system is prepared. However, aid actors must also explore early recovery programming.

Driven in part by Damascus-based INGOs, donors are already engaging in more open debate about what early recovery means in the Syrian context. Such discussions may illuminate entry points and programming opportunities that remain comfortably within donor red lines. Universal consensus is unlikely, however. For now, some donors are expected to reject early recovery as being politically unacceptable and a possible step toward reconstruction. Some key donors, including the US, view matters differently. Washington has been vocal concerning its support for early recov-

ery works, which it sees as an important step for increasing the accountability and scope of aid activities. In the narrow sense, early recovery phase allows for far more robust guardrails than the humanitarian modalities that have largely defined the aid response to date. Such activities may be critical for boosting Syrians' resilience and ultimately reducing their reliance on foreign assistance. Crucially, Washington draws a hard line between such activities and trade, investment, and reconstruction, which still carry the risk of sanctions.

To ensure red lines and compliance norms are respected, practical steps must still be taken in terms of project design. Neither more substantial aid work in Government of Syria areas nor early recovery amounts to normalisation with the Government of Syria. Nonetheless, donors' worst fears of aid instrumentalisation are at risk of being realised if stronger safeguards are not put in place. Identifying better practices to mitigate risk and prevent aid capture by Assad regime elites and other odious actors, including contracting cartels and politically compromised vendors, will be critical. It is in the interest of all donors, aid actors, and UN agencies — particularly those who most strongly advocate for more expansive programming — to be candid about risks and mitigations. The record of the aid response in Syria abounds with instances in which the Government of Syria exploited humanitarian needs to extract political concessions. Aid actors must learn these lessons.

F *Provided that Russia is willing to carry out its veto threat, the aid response will either be compelled to engage in greater support for early recovery programming, or to operate without a cross-border mechanism. Donors likely cannot insist on keeping the latter without providing the former.*

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 WASHINGTON, DC

In Open Letter, US Congressmen Urge Biden to Adopt Hard-line Stand on Syria

On 11 January, a bipartisan group of legislators [sent an open letter](#) to US President Joe Biden raising alarm over Arab rapprochement with Damascus and urging his administration to take a hard line against President Assad. The letter was sent by Senators Jim Risch (R-ID) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ), respectively the ranking member and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Representatives Michael McCaul (R-TX) and Gregory Meeks (D-NY), respectively the ranking member and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. It calls for “a restoration of US leadership on the crisis in Syria” by using the threat of sanctions to dissuade Arab partner governments from normalisation with the Government of Syria. Listing Government of Syria violations of international law and characterising reintegration into the Arab League as “unacceptable,” the letter advocates the use of tools such as “mandatory” Caesar Act sanctions and counter-narcotics capabilities to deter rehabilitation of the Syrian Government, end violations, ensure humanitarian access, counter the captagon trade, and promote justice and accountability. Additionally, the letter requests that the administration share with Congress its strategy to counter the Syrian Government’s reported diversion of humanitarian aid through exchange rate manipulation, and calls for an interagency briefing on US Syria policy with National Security Council participation.

Disruption to US Syria policy, or business as usual?

While the letter generated a ripple of response among US Syria-watchers and Syrian activists, it is unlikely to presage any significant change in US policy, impede trends toward normalisation, or have a major impact on the implementation environment in Syria (see: [Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis](#)). While hawkish proposals such as these are to some degree popular with congressmen of both parties, none of the measures is entirely new or likely to be implemented in full as the US pursues bilateral and multi-lateral negotiations over Syria. US efforts and the impact of any such push are likely to be limited given the US administration’s endorsement of early recovery both through UN Security Council Resolution 2585 and in its own programming portfolio (see: [Syria Update 20 December 2021](#)).

It is important for the aid community to decouple its work from the politics of normalisation. Unpalatable as it may be, the facts on the ground in Syria admit of few productive approaches for those advocating a hard-line position toward Damascus. Such approaches risk perpetuating civilians’ suffering in order to spite Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Done correctly, aid projects implemented in Government of Syria areas will primarily benefit ordinary Syrians, not the Government of Syria. Early recovery and development-style projects that bring more robust safeguards will reduce the risk of aid capture. The current US administration is likely to behave accordingly, and a letter from four legislators is unlikely to change that. In the long term, donors and implementers must find better ways of communicating their approaches and objectives.



02 NORTHEAST SYRIA

Autonomous Administration Cracks Down on Service-Related Protests, Dismisses 43 Employees

On 10 January, at least three civilians were wounded when the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fired on a crowd of approximately [100 protesters](#) demonstrating against fuel and bread shortages in al-Suwaydiyah village, in western Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Two days later, the Autonomous Administration [reportedly](#) dismissed 43 of its employees over their alleged participation in the protests and suspended their relief allocations. The SDF also imposed a curfew in the village, raided suspected protesters’ homes, and arrested at least 68 young men.

Simmering discontent

The unrest reflects a confluence of factors, including service-related grievances, governance shortfalls and, according to the SDF, the instigation of Damascus-aligned provocateurs seeking to undermine northeast Syria from within. No doubt, northeast Syria has experienced a crisis in the cost and quality of living, with staple bread quality decreasing despite rising prices. Such issues, alongside fuel price hikes, have driven protests and provoked violent crackdowns (see: [Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring Pilot Project May 2021](#) and [Syria Update 24 May 2021](#)). For its part, The SDF has accused demonstrators of belonging to a “protest movement” and of affiliation with the Syrian Government and Iranian militias. SDF-affiliated [social me-](#)

dia have claimed that the Government of Syria is funding and arming Arab clans in the Ar-Raqqa countryside, whom it claims are attacking the SDF-aligned Internal Security Forces and inciting local populations against the Autonomous Administration. Such claims are likely not wholecloth inventions, but they should not obscure hard truths about the difficulties of governance and community acceptance in peripheral areas of the Autonomous Administration. Aid actors should approach such communities with care, and they must be particularly sensitive to the potential risks of appearing closely aligned with local authorities with limited acceptance.



03 TELL ABIAD

Three Turkish Soldiers Killed in Tell Abiad, Prompting Retaliation and Threats

On 8 January, three Turkish soldiers were killed in an explosion that struck their military vehicle while it was passing the border post at Tell Abiad, in the Turkish-backed-opposition area of control in Ar-Raqqa Governorate. On 11 January, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar [announced](#) that 22 members of the People's Protection Units (YPG – the backbone of the SDF) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had been “neutralised” in a retaliatory operation. He stated that punitive operations would escalate and Turkish forces would target “terrorists and traitors” wherever they are. This comes as Turkey [continues to launch airstrikes](#) and shell border areas, including [recent bombardments](#) of Ain Al Arab (Kobani) and its surrounding villages, leading to widespread displacement and reports of deaths. SDF figures [denied](#) involvement in the 8 January attack. A member of the Joint Presidency of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Fawza Yousef, stated that Turkey's allegations sought “to create legitimacy for launching new attacks against the region.”

Even if a wider incursion into Autonomous Administration-held territory is not on the cards for now, relatively limited “punitive operations” such as cross-line raids, airstrikes, and shelling will still lead to deaths, displacement, and instability in the region, increasing humanitarian needs.

Another ‘final straw’?

Attacks on Turkish soldiers in Syria, while relatively rare, can be expected to prompt retaliation, leading to escalation that increases the risk of wider conflict and displacement. While Ankara has seemingly backed down (see: [Syria Update 20 December 2021](#)) on its threat of a renewed incursion into northeast Syria following its warning that such attacks constitute a ‘final straw’ (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)), it continues to perceive a threat to its national security along its southern border and so is likely to continue with shelling and airstrikes to maintain low-level deterrent pressure. The SDF [has stated](#) that it is not party to the almost four-decades-long war between Turkey and the PKK, but Ankara continues to view the YPG as an extension of the PKK and, thus, a terrorist threat. Even if a wider incursion into Autonomous Administration-held territory is not on the cards for now, relatively limited “punitive operations” such as cross-line raids, airstrikes, and shelling will still lead to deaths, displacement, and instability in the region, increasing humanitarian needs.



04 IDLEB

HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani Inaugurates Aleppo-Bab al-Hawa Road

On 7 January, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani and Salvation Government Prime Minister Ali Keda publicly appeared together in the border city of Sarmada to [inaugurate](#) a new road extending to Tall Aqibrin, nearby. During a speech to mark the occasion, the HTS leader promised to create nearly 100,000 job opportunities within three years in “liberated areas”, transforming them into an economic hub. This is al-Jolani's second public appearance at a governance project in the past three months; on 23 November, [he met](#) with Salvation Government ministers and pledged a three-million-dollar subsidy to solve the bread crisis in Idlib.

The road to political legitimacy

Al-Jolani's long-standing quest for local and international political legitimacy may explain his frequent appearances and increased engagement in public affairs. Since severing ties with Al-Qaeda in 2017, [HTS has](#) increasingly sidelined the radical wing within its ranks, shifted its operational focus from the global to the local level, and launched the Salvation Government, all in service of this objective. Al-Jolani has

become more attentive to providing stability through better governance and improved economy, and taken to donning civilian garb rather than a military uniform. Nevertheless, HTS's radical past may require its leader to make greater strides to convince the international community the group has changed.

The Aleppo-Bab al-Hawa road is the first project of this size to be implemented by the Salvation Government in Idleb, and it will likely have a positive, but limited, impact on its economy. The road, which will connect Tall Aqibrin and Samada (a distance of 3,200 metres), may incentivise traders to transport their goods farther afield. However, Idleb's still-damaged infrastructure may undermine the project's impact.



05 NORTHEAST SYRIA

Autonomous Administration Threatens NGOs over Staff Salaries, Reviving Tax Debate

On 7 January, [media sources](#) reported that the Autonomous Administration sent a written communication to local and international NGOs operating in its areas demanding that they provide information concerning the number of employees, their positions, and salaries, requesting that NGOs “adhere and abide by the written communication or be subject to liability”. The Autonomous Administration previously discussed staff salaries with the NGOs, with the apparent aim of imposing an income tax. However, the NGOs rejected the proposal, putting the discussions on hold.

Tax incentives

There are competing explanations for the transparency demand. The NGOs Affairs Office has justified the request on the need for tighter controls over security, prevention of corruption and nepotism, and safeguarding the interests of donor agencies. However, aid workers have protested that any such information will be instrumentalised to impose an income tax. The confrontation comes amid a long-running push to rationalise tax collection and stabilise the Autonomous Administration's financial and budgetary affairs, including proposals to create a central bank-like monetary authority (see: [Syria Update 6 December 2021](#)). To the Autonomous Administration's critics, the move is yet another measure to pressure NGOs, interfere in their work, and control the aid environment. NGOs have [reportedly](#) faced

repeated restrictions on their activities by the Autonomous Administration, including the suspension of their licenses without cause. Even international NGOs have been reportedly subjected to interference, including in site selection and during distribution through local councils and neighbourhood committees. Donors should follow such developments closely, particularly as increasingly regularised administrative processes introduce heightened reporting and programmatic requirements to aid work in the region.



06 LATTAKIA

Government Delegation Vows to Buy Lattakia's Citrus Crop to Mitigate Crisis

On 12 January, a [Government of Syria delegation](#) headed by Prime Minister Hussein Arnous under direct orders from President Bashar al-Assad visited Lattakia to pledge state support for ailing citrus farmers. Recent citrus crops have been severely impacted by deteriorating economic and environmental conditions in Syria; in addition to complications due to [water scarcity and COVID-19](#), fires triggered by heat waves in 2020 destroyed around [800 hectares](#) of fruit trees in Lattakia alone. Moreover, citrus farmers are unable to afford high fuel and fertiliser prices and have little-to-no access to markets. Although farmers have relied on exports to Russia and Iraq in recent years, neither country has imported the crop in substantial quantities this year, leaving farmers to rely on local markets with low purchasing power. As a response, farmers have been vocal about their grievances and have neglected their crops, leaving them uncultivated to avoid additional expenses.

In response, the Syrian Government has declared that it will [subsidise](#) the farmers, buying the crops directly and marketing them nationally via the Syrian Trade Corporation. The Ministry of Public Works and Housing will reportedly put 100 trucks at the disposal of the Trade Corporation to transport the citrus to various local markets, and there is discussion of opening juice factories in Lattakia to salvage the excess.

A relationship left to rot on the vine?

The delegation's visit casts light on the politics of agriculture in Syria and the shortcomings of state policy toward agriculturalists, even in priority coastal areas that are often favoured for support. Already, hundreds of tonnes of cit-

rus produce have been left uncultivated to rot this season. Citrus farmers have struggled throughout the conflict, but grievances have recently mounted. A pressure campaign by producers has highlighted the plight of citrus cultivators, who are concentrated in the Latakia (where citrus farming supports around 44,700 households) and Tartous Governorates, where key Government-supporting segments of society such as Alawites and Syrian Arab Army veterans are highly represented. Demographics may indeed factor in the decision to expend limited state resources (and political capital) shoring up these producers, given the struggles facing all of Syrian society.

There are doubts about the impact of the single-payer support deal favoured by the Syrian Government. Among them are concerns over low purchasing power in the Syrian market and the lack of plausible export markets. Such farmers remain subject to the structural problems of the Syrian economy, which need well-planned and sustainable solutions (see: [Syria Update 10 January 2022](#)). Notable among these is the lack of an appropriate food security scheme. Despite overproduction on the coast, many Syrians cannot afford to eat, and 12.4 million are food insecure. Humanitarian aid organisations will struggle to counter the impacts of Syria's downward economic spiral on their own. Success in meeting objectives in both the livelihoods and food security sectors will depend on balancing the need for lucrative exports and the basic sustenance needs of the wider population.



07 DAMASCUS

Fatah Secretary Reiterates Support for Syria's Return to the Arab League

On 10 January, the Secretary of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah), Jibril Rajoub, stated that Syria's exclusion from the Arab League is a "disgrace to the Arabs" while participating in a delegation to Damascus, according to [media](#) reports. Following a press conference at Al-Sham hotel, Rajoub stated that the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, would visit Damascus soon, and reportedly conveyed a written message concerning the visit from Abbas to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Abbas last visited Syria to congratulate al-Assad on retaining the presidency following presidential elections in 2021 despite widespread rejection of the elections' legitimacy among international observers.

F *Damascus will continue to use every such sign of support to portray normalisation as a fait accompli.*

Big talk, little change

Neither Rajoub's statements nor the announcement of an upcoming visit — an apparent show of support by Abbas — break new ground in the Palestine-Syria relationship. Nonetheless, Damascus has seized on them to advance the narrative that regional actors, including an expanding bloc within the Arab League and Palestinian authorities (whose relations with Damascus have been strained in the conflict), are eager to normalise relations with the Government of Syria. Syrian state media have [since boasted](#) of efforts to increase Palestinian-Syrian cooperation, and Damascus will continue to use every sign of support to portray normalisation as a fait accompli. Such rapprochement will be particularly sensitive locally and in Palestinian camps in Syria, given the active role played by many Palestinian-Syrians in the conflict. Donors operating in and around the camps, which are often priority areas for programming, should monitor such developments closely for impact on their activities.

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.

An Unauthorized War: The Shaky Legal Ground for the U.S. Operation in Syria

What does it say? While the US intervention in Syria was justified legally as a counter-terrorism mission against the Islamic State, it has expanded through the use of creative legal interpretations as US forces fight on-and-off battles with Iran-backed militias.

Reading between the lines: “Mission creep” is nothing new in contemporary military engagements. The questionable legality of deployment in Syria is unlikely to override what are perceived as US national security interests.

Source: Foreign Affairs
Language: English
Date: 11 January 2022

Assad Tests the Patience of Its Ally Russia

What does it say? The piece explores Russia’s apparent dissatisfaction with President al-Assad’s inflexibility, particularly regarding the UN-sponsored constitutional negotiations in Geneva.

Reading between the lines: While Russia may express frustrations with al-Assad’s refusal to compromise on the constitution, it has no alternative to replace him and is now too invested in Syria to abandon him as long as he retains a domestic support base.

Source: New Lines
Language: English
Date: 11 January 2022

Drug Smuggling in Syria: Involvement by Assad Regime and Complication on Regional Countries

What does it say? The report documents how the Assad regime and affiliated militias use drug smuggling not only for profit, but as a pressure tactic in a number of regional countries.

Reading between the lines: Tackling Syria’s emergence as a narco-state is an increasing priority in the region, as well as in Western policy circles, with the street value of seized drugs, particularly captagon reaching into the billions of dollars.

Source: ORSAM Center for Middle Eastern Studies
Language: English
Date: 10 January 2022

Settlement Begins in Ar-Raqqa and Continues in Shmeitiyeh, Deir-ez-Zor Countryside

What does it say? A reconciliation campaign that began in November in Deir-ez-Zor continues in Ar-Raqqa.

Reading between the lines: The campaign re-asserts the primacy of Damascus in regions where its formal authority has been weak, if not non-existent, lending the Syrian Government yet another tool to pressure the Autonomous Administration where it is weakest.

Source: SANA
Language: Arabic
Date: 12 January 2022

The PYD-PKK Relationship Under Scrutiny

What does it say? The report highlights two different approaches within the PYD/SDF: a pragmatic approach seeking localisation and a relationship with the US, and a more resistant traditionalist approach desiring a relationship with Damascus.

Reading between the lines: The outcome of the contest will shape the future of northeast Syria and its relations with other regional actors, including Turkey and the Government of Syria.

Source: EUI Middle East Directions
Language: English
Date: 10 January 2022

Assad's Normalization and the Politics of Erasure in Syria

What does it say? The paper argues that “step-by-step” diplomacy, engagement with the Assad regime to create incentives for reform and move towards political transition, is doomed to fail and will only legitimate and empower President al-Assad.

Reading between the lines:

The paper is right that donor governments should not expect the Assad regime to make concessions, however small. Such a strategy is doomed to fail. It is incumbent upon donors to devise aid strategies in Syria that use robust safeguards to prevent political legitimization, while still meeting the needs of the Syrian people.

Source: DAWN
Language: English
Date: 11 January 2022

Cuba donates home-grown COVID-19 vaccines to Syria

What does it say? Cuba donates 240,000 doses of its home-grown vaccines, which have yet to be approved by the WHO but have shown effectiveness in clinical trials.

Reading between the lines:

Western vaccines have, on the whole, not been forthcoming to Syria. China, and now Cuba, have stepped up to fill this gap, seeking improved relations and also global prestige through so-called vaccine diplomacy.

Source: Xinhua
Language: English
Date: 7 January 2022

Iran Eyes Railway Link with Syria and Mediterranean

What does it say? The Iranian government has announced that work is about to commence on a railway that would connect Iran, through Iraq, to Syria's port in Lattakia.

Reading between the lines: Talk of building the railway has been swirling for over two decades; the announcement is unlikely to trigger sudden progress.

Source: The Syria Report
Language: English
Date: 11 January 2022

Northeast Syria's Journey: An Exclusive Interview with Syrian Democratic Forces Commander Mazloum Abdi

What does it say? In an interview, SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Abdi expressed the Autonomous Administration's openness to dialogue with all parties, including Turkey and the Syrian Government; however, he made clear that despite its challenges, a return to the status quo of 2011 is not on the cards.

Reading between the lines: Abdi's canny diplomatic language in the interview reflects both the calculations of a keen political operator and the challenging position of northeast Syria's political and military leadership as they navigate relationships with a wide variety of interlocutors whose conflicting interests in Syria constrain their options.

Source: Washington Institute
Language: English
Date: 6 January 2022

World Health Organization Sends Shipment of Medical Aid to Northeast Syria

What does it say? The World Health Organization sent more than 32 tonnes of medical supplies from its warehouses in Lattakia and Damascus to Autonomous Administration territory in northeast Syria.

Reading between the lines: Syrian health facilities are in a poor state, including in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration. The shipment of medical supplies from the WHO will likely prove vital to many in northeast Syria.

Source: Enab Baladi
Language: Arabic
Date: 11 January 2022

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