

Syria Update

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

IS Prison Raid, Biggest Attack since '19, Displaces 45,000

Syrian Government Institutes New Reconciliation Drives, Military Pardons

Unlikely to garner a new wave of military recruits, the policies point to Government efforts to nonetheless replenish ranks. [Pg 7](#)

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW

Vital Fishkhabour-Semalka Crossing Partially Reopens Following US Mediation

It is a positive step, but not a total solution for transit issues. [Pg 6](#)

Damascus Offers Financial Independence to Municipalities

The measures aim to improve local tax allocation, but higher authorities retain power. [Pg 6](#)

Deal Inked to Supply Lebanon with Electricity from Jordan via Syria

The agreement gives Damascus leverage over Lebanon and edges Syria closer to regional normalisation. [Pg 7](#)

Finance Ministry: Digital Tax Scheme to Boost Collection

The Ministry of Finance is digitising its operations across all economic sectors to increase revenues. [Pg 7](#)

As-Sweida Protest Takes Aim at Endemic Crime

Protests held in As-Sweida Governorate in response to the absence of the state and the high crime rate in the governorate. [Pg 8](#)

EU Foreign Affairs Council: No Normalisation, Reconstruction, or Sanctions Relief

The Council foresees normalisation until UNSC Resolution 2254 is implemented. [Pg 8](#)

Archive photo showing suspected IS fighters inside an SDF prison. The group's latest prison attack highlights its continued threat to stability in northeast Syria and the need to resolve lingering questions over the group's adherents. Image courtesy of Mayadeen.



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.

[READ MORE](#)

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

On 20 January, IS militants launched a raid on al-Sina'a prison in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled Al-Hasakeh City in an attempt to free former IS fighters held as inmates. The attack was the group's most significant operation in Syria since its defeat in 2019, and led to a six-day siege, with SDF forces finally re-establishing control of the prison on 26 January. As of writing, however, clashes with a small number of IS holdouts is reportedly ongoing. While reports have not yet been confirmed, hundreds of Islamic State (IS) and SDF fighters may have been killed, and 45,000 civilians were displaced from nearby neighbourhoods. Throughout the confrontation, the lives of between 700 and 850 boys and teenagers from IS families who were being held at the prison hung in the balance. The incident highlights the continued threat IS poses to stability in north-east Syria, the challenges associated with IS prisons and foreign fighters, the vulnerable position of children from IS families, and the need for aid actors to maintain capacity for a quick pivot to emergency response in northeast Syria in the face of future attacks.

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

- 01 After more than a month of US mediation, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq has agreed to open a vital crossing between its territory and northeast Syria twice a month. The re-opening of the Fishkhabour-Semalka border crossing, although limited, is an important step towards easing good shortages and access limitations in northeast Syria.
- 02 On 27 December, a presidential decree consolidated rules for municipal funding, ostensibly to support local development. Theoretically, the move could provide more financial flexibility for local development projects, but the 'real' power remains in the hands of central state institutions and security forces.
- 03 On 26 January, the Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese energy ministers signed an agreement to supply Lebanon with 400 megawatts of electricity, imported from Jordan through Syria. The agreement is another development in the regional normalisation process with Damascus, and it gives Syria leverage over Lebanon.
- 04 On 19 January, the Government of Syria Finance Minister announced plans for a "clear and transparent" electronic tax system to improve tax collection. If the new system is widely implemented, Syrians will see their purchasing power and access to goods and services decreased. Aid actors should take note.
- 05 On 25 January, the Syrian Government announced a pardon for draft evaders and a new reconciliation drive in western Ghouta. While not likely to generate enlistment at scale, the initiatives are part of broader Government efforts to replenish military ranks during periods of relative calm.
- 06 On 25 January, protests were reported at the Palace of Justice in As-Sweida City demanding that Syrian authorities establish law-and-order and hold accountable those responsible for insecurity in As-Sweida Governorate. The confluence of endemic crime, an absence of justice, and the potential for exploitation by elements within the state are likely to threaten community stability and civil order in As-Sweida and other Government-held territories for the foreseeable future.
- 07 The EU Foreign Affairs Council has reiterated that Europe will not lift sanctions or engage in reconstruction or normalisation with the Government of Syria. Aid organisations should note that although early recovery was not a major focus during the meeting, the EU is unlikely to block considered steps towards.

07 

BRUSSELS

**EU Foreign Affairs Council:
No Normalisation, Reconstruction,
or Sanctions Relief**

01  

**Vital Fishkhabour-Semalka
Crossing Partially Reopens
Following US Mediation**

03  

**Deal Inked to Supply
Lebanon with Electricity
from Jordan via Syria**

05  

**Syrian Government Institutes
New Reconciliation Drives,
Military Pardons**

06  

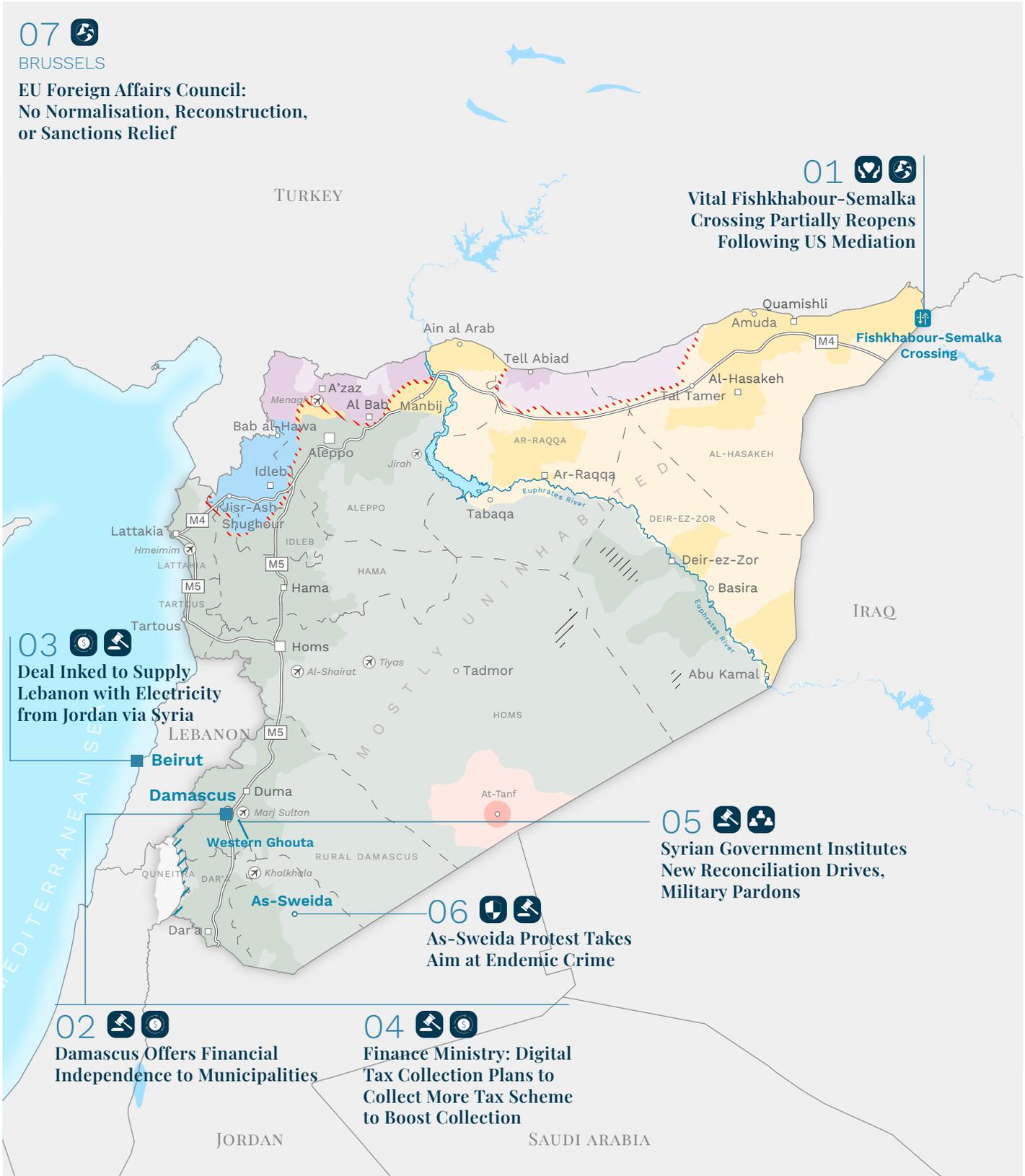
**As-Sweida Protest Takes
Aim at Endemic Crime**

02  

**Damascus Offers Financial
Independence to Municipalities**

04  

**Finance Ministry: Digital
Tax Collection Plans to
Collect More Tax Scheme
to Boost Collection**



Population Density

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

LOW POPULATION DENSITY

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 26 January, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [announced they had regained control](#)¹ over al-Sina'a prison in Al-Hasakeh City, ending a six-day standoff with Islamic State (IS) fighters and as many as 3,500 to 5,000 inmates who had overrun the prison (see: [Syria Update 24 January 2022](#)). IS sources have claimed that 800 of its fighters escaped the prison, while the US-led International Coalition put the number in the low double digits. As of writing, clashes are reportedly ongoing with a small number of IS holdouts near the prison. The jailbreak and intense clashes prompted the flash displacement of 45,000 people from the surrounding area, while nearby neighbourhoods lost services and mobility, and a night-time curfew was imposed, [according to OCHA](#). As many as 250 IS combatants were killed in the nearly weeklong prison siege, according to the SDF, which mobilised 10,000 fighters, backed by International Coalition air and armour support, to contain the prison break and round up escapees. Thirty SDF fighters were reportedly killed.

The importance of the attack can hardly be overstated. It is IS's most significant operation in Syria since its territorial defeat in 2019, and the ensuing chaos highlights the continued threat IS poses to stability in northeast Syria and the conundrum presented by incarcerated foreign fighters. It is also a reminder of the vulnerable position of the children of IS families, as an estimated 700 or more boys and teenagers were used as [human shields](#) by IS fighters inside the prison, with reports of deaths and injuries. The attack and its aftermath will drive donor governments and aid implementers to think hard about how they operate in northeast Syria. In recent years, the international community has been singularly fixed on questions of how to mitigate the appeal of radical and extremist groups and their recruitment in post-IS areas. The incidents demonstrate the dangers inherent to deferring justice, accountability, and repatriation measures for detainees linked to IS, many of whom remain in limbo. Several key questions are now paramount:

Once defeated, is IS expanding?

The incident demonstrates that IS can significantly destabilise northeast Syria, even with limited capacity. While the number of fighters and escape prisoners is disputed, the attack is unquestionably a success for the group. It is IS's most significant operation in terms of coordination, planning, scale, and impact since its geographical demise in March 2019, and it demonstrates that the group retains the ability to carry out so-called '[spectacular](#)' operations in the heart of SDF territories.

IS's presence in eastern Syria is thought to consist primarily of small cells of committed fighters dispersed across Syria's forbidding hinterland and steppe. The group's evolutionary trajectory is now a foremost question. While foreign recruits once lent significant momentum to IS, its operations have recently become more localised. The current status quo in northeast Syria could present a foothold for IS, which is eager to capitalise on anti-SDF sentiment to promote its own objectives. In that respect, social inequality, political exclusion, and economic grievances are a first-order concern.

Who will decide the fate of foreign fighters?

The attack lends new impetus to the debate over the repatriation of foreign fighters held at SDF prisons. Since the fall of the caliphate, the SDF has been [yoked with the responsibility of housing around 12,000 foreign fighters](#) in poorly guarded prisons spread across northeast Syria. With [little progress on repatriation](#), the SDF has repeatedly demanded support to fend off attacks and increase internal security. Despite backing from the US-led International Coalition, local authorities lack the financial, judicial, administrative, or military capacity to guarantee security and stability. Nonetheless, there are few alternatives to reliance on the SDF's makeshift carceral system so long as foreign states remain reluctant to repatriate their nationals or otherwise develop sustainable solutions for the risk posed by IS prisoners.

Women and children ... last?

The presence of 700–850 minors at the prison during the attack brought to the forefront concerns about the fate of underage prisoners, who have received far less attention than detained IS fighters. On 23 January, the SDF [claimed](#) that children were being used as human shields inside the prison, and it laid responsibility for the fate of the boys and teens at the feet of the attackers. On 24 January, [UNICEF](#) and [other humanitarian organisations](#) called for an immediate evacuation of the children, excoriating governments for failing to repatriate citizens held in IS jails and camps. However, the call was ignored, and there are reports that a number of young detainees were killed in the fighting. In the short term, it is crucial to improve the living conditions of the youths detained in northeast Syria. In the long term, aid actors must also explore options to relocate the youths – as well as vulnerable women held in northeast Syria, particularly in al-Hol camp – to more adequate rehabilitation centres where services are better and latent safety risks are lower. Counter-radicalisation objectives can be supported by reducing the desperation of young and vulnerable detainees and separating them from adult fighters. Such steps should be a priority, along with the provision of greater protection, medical, and psychological support services.

1 On 27 January, reports indicated that [a small number of fighters may still be holding out](#).

An unforeseen crisis

From a humanitarian response standpoint, perhaps the most relevant aspects of the attack were the massive displacements it drove, forcing civilians to shelter in place and endure limited supplies, service interruptions, and lockdown orders. Many of the 45,000 IDPs sheltered in the Government of Syria-controlled security square in Al-Hasakeh City. On 24 January, the United Nations Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria crisis, Mark Cutts, noted that “most of the displaced people have sought safety with family and friends in nearby areas, but there are about 750 people being hosted at two temporary shelters.”

All told, the incident highlights the need for donor governments to think hard about their best-case outcomes for IS-linked camp and prison populations in Syria. In addition, the UN, international aid actors, and local partners should see in it the need to establish a more flexible mechanism to guarantee unhindered humanitarian access. The need to coordinate with Damascus and navigate border crossing issues with Iraq are but some of the operational risks to access that exist in northeast Syria. Additionally, the incident draws attention to the continued need for implementers to maintain dynamic security and contingency plans, given the risk of surprise attack. Such planning should countenance wide-reaching access and mobility limitations. Finally, local partners should coordinate with local security forces over emergency response capacities, including evacuation, services, and essential supplies to affected neighbourhoods.

Nonetheless, there are few alternatives to reliance on the SDF’s makeshift carceral system so long as foreign states remain reluctant to repatriate their nationals or otherwise develop sustainable solutions for the risk posed by IS prisoners.

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 FISHKHABOUR-SEMALKA CROSSING

Vital Fishkhabour-Semalka Crossing Partially Reopens Following US Mediation

On 20 January, [media sources](#) reported that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq has agreed with northeast Syrian officials to re-open the strategic Fishkhabour-Semalka border crossing following US mediation. Under the deal, the crossing will open twice per month, although KRG authorities refuse to fully open the border until protests at the crossing point are dispersed. Families of Syrian PKK fighters killed inside Iraqi Kurdistan have been demonstrating near the crossing, demanding the KRG release the fighters' bodies. KRG authorities have also conditioned the full restoration of border transit upon allowing the Iraqi Kurdish Barzani Charity Foundation to operate in northeast Syria. The crossing, which is the only major transport link between northeast Syria and the outside world, has been [closed](#) since 15 December, following clashes between Iraqi Kurdish border guards and members of the Revolutionary Youth Union, the youth wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The closure of the border crossing cut off a vital lifeline for 1.8 million people in need in northeast Syria, stopping all humanitarian and commercial traffic and prompting relief agencies to [express concern](#) about its impact on humanitarian operations.

Reviving a lifeline

The limited re-opening of the Fishkhabour-Semalka border crossing is an important first step towards improving the humanitarian situation and easing the shortage of com-



IDPs flee violence in Al-Hasakeh following a prison break and heavy clashes between IS fighters and the SDF. Image courtesy of Etihad Press.

modities such as sugar and bread, which has fuelled protests in Autonomous Administration areas (see: [Syria Update 24 January 2022](#)). Limited aid access through the crossing will likely worsen the already dire conditions in northeast Syria, where drought, failed crops, water, and food shortages are pervasive issues (see: [Syria Update 10 January 2022](#)). Also affected is the informal oil trade between northeast Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, a major revenue stream for the Autonomous Administration. Despite US mediation, a durable resolution remains elusive, and aid actors should anticipate the possibility of subsequent closures.



02 DAMASCUS

Damascus Offers Financial Independence to Municipalities

On 27 December, a [presidential decree](#) “unified financial regulations” pertaining to municipalities’ share in state revenues, with the aim of increasing municipal revenues and “enhancing their efficiency and effectiveness” for local development. The law specifies that a municipality will receive 10 percent of fees generated from real estate sales, and 65 percent from other fees such as transportation and storage services. Notably, the law exempts from taxes real estate belonging to religious institutions, diplomatic missions, and registered charities and cooperatives.

More decentralisation, more independence?

At least in theory, the law codifies the rules under which municipalities generate revenue for local development projects, although it is not immediately clear whether municipal coffers will be filled as a result. In that respect, it is in the spirit of [Legislative Decree No. 107](#), which granted more operational independence to municipal officials as part of a broader, as yet unrealised, localisation agenda. However, as with Decree No. 107, much of the ‘real’ power remains in the hands of central state institutions and security forces. Even in towns where funds are available, development planning continues to rest primarily in the hands of centrally appointed governorate councils. Local security forces can still intervene to alter a project or block implementation altogether (see: [‘Arrested Development’: Rethinking Local Development in Syria](#)). Funding is not the only shortage, as technical expertise is often insufficient to carry out activities. Despite these challenges, enhanced financial independence in dire economic conditions could allow local and international aid

actors more influence over local development at a time when space is seemingly opening for more projects in more locations across Government-held Syria.



03 BEIRUT, LEBANON

Deal Inked to Supply Lebanon with Electricity from Jordan via Syria

On 26 January, the Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese energy ministers met in Beirut and signed an [agreement](#) to supply Lebanon with 400 megawatts of electricity, enough for around two full hours of use per day. The agreement, to be [funded](#) by the World Bank at a cost of around 200 million USD, will see electricity imported from Jordan through Syria. Implementation is expected to begin within two months. As part of the deal, Syria will [receive](#) 8 percent of the total amount of electricity supplied. US officials gave the [green light](#) for the agreement, which therefore will not be subject to sanctions otherwise imposed on dealing with Damascus. Syrian Energy Minister Ghassan Al-Zamel [hailed](#) the deal as “the beginning of greater cooperation among Arabs.”

Every crisis is an opportunity

The agreement is another step in regional cooperation with Damascus (see: [Syria in 2022: New Aid Approaches For an Evolving Crisis](#)). It comes shortly after reports of a secret deal for Israel to supply gas to Lebanon (see: [Syria Update 24 January 2022](#)), which, while unconfirmed and denied by Lebanon, highlights the crisis in the country as something that can upend the regional diplomatic status quo. The Government of Syria is able to position itself as a necessary player in the effort to prevent Lebanon’s collapse, and as a crucial partner in its economic recovery, with the electricity agreement coming alongside a deal to supply Lebanon with Egyptian gas via the Arab Gas Pipeline (see: [Syria Update 20 September 2021](#)). Upon the implementation of both deals, around [six hours of electricity per day](#) will be supplied through Syria, granting Damascus increased leverage over Lebanon. Highlighting its importance to the region’s economic growth and stability may provide the Government of Syria with its strongest hand in the push for normalisation, with the [now-delayed](#) Arab League summit in Algiers later this year expected to include [discussions](#) over Syria’s return. Such normalisation may lead in turn to the greater regional interest needed to drive recovery in Syria — though the US Caesar Act continues to pro-

vide roadblocks to investment, despite hints of a loosening sanctions environment (see: [Syria Update 24 January 2022](#)).



04 DAMASCUS

Finance Ministry: Digital Tax Scheme to Boost Collection

In line with ongoing efforts to expand state revenues, Minister of Finance Kinan Yaghi on 19 January announced [plans](#) for an electronic tax system that would be “clear and transparent” to improve tax collection. Digitisation is an ongoing trend at Syrian Government institutions. A similar system was already implemented to facilitate consular services and payment of consular fees (see: [Syria Update 13 December 2021](#)). Yaghi stated that improved tax collection procedures have generated over 100 million USD since mid-2020, reportedly half of total taxes owed to the state. [Alarmed](#) restaurant and fast food shop owners stated that this will force them to raise prices.

Modernising at all costs

Electronic taxing and accounting schemes are generally a good alternative to a process vulnerable to corruption and evasion. However, upward pressure on inflation will be difficult to avoid. The ability to manoeuvre around taxes in the past allowed small and large traders alike more flexibility in pricing. Aid actors should take note. If the new tax system is widely implemented, Syrians will see their purchasing power and access to goods and services decreased.



05 DAMASCUS COUNTRYSIDE

Syrian Government Institutes New Reconciliation Drives, Military Pardons

On 25 January, the Government of Syria [instated](#) a general pardon for men who skirted mandatory military service (typically a criminal offense) since the start of the conflict. The pardon waives charges and fines for avoiding service should draft dodgers present themselves to officials within three months if they are inside

Syria, or four months if they are abroad. The amnesty does not waive military service requirements; thus, beneficiaries would still be expected to enlist if eligible. Also on 25 January, Syrian Military Security [announced](#) a new ‘settlement’ drive in western Ghouta for military-age men to reconcile their status with the Government of Syria. The drive pertains to residents in Zakyeh and surrounding areas of western Ghouta, including al-Tiba, Mqeilibeh, and Ein El-Bayda. Such drives have been part and parcel to the Syrian Government’s political and military reintegration of areas previously under opposition control (see: [Political Demographics: The Markings of the Government of Syria Reconciliation Measures in Eastern Ghouta](#)).

An opportunistic compromise

It is unlikely that the amnesty will prompt a wave of returns from abroad, especially given the risks of detention and forced conscription. Instead, Damascus is likely cashing in on a general reduction in conflict-related violence (which deterred many military-age men from fulfilling their military service in recent years) in an effort to replenish its ranks during a period of relative calm. The pardon indicates Damascus’s continued use of military and political amnesties as a [mechanism](#) for serving state interests, as opposed to efforts to prioritise human rights or protection within the Syrian security sector. While neither development dramatically changes prospects for aid implementers in areas of Government control, reconciliation drives and conscription campaigns commonly limit mobility for military-age men fearful of detention or resistant to enlistment, limiting their access to aid services and livelihood programmes.



06 AS-SWEIDA

As-Sweida Protest Takes Aim at Endemic Crime

On 25 January, protests were [reported](#) at the Palace of Justice in As-Sweida City demanding that Syrian authorities establish justice, punish criminals, and hold accountable those responsible for insecurity in As-Sweida Governorate. The protests began after the body of a young man killed by a criminal gang was [found](#) in north-eastern As-Sweida on 23 January. Local sources indicated that [local armed groups arrested](#) suspected gang members who were believed responsible for the killing (and reportedly disowned by their families) and handed them over to

Government security forces, but it remains unclear whether authorities will take further action against the perpetrators.

Law and order on the lam

Continued instability and insecurity in As-Sweida Governorate are driving widespread popular discontent over the inability – or unwillingness – of the Syrian Government to play a law enforcement role. Kidnapping, murder, drug trafficking and other crimes are commonplace, enabled by the widespread availability of weapons. The violence likely contributes to a worsening economic crisis and compounds difficult living conditions. Demanding accountability through public protest is an indication that the community in As-Sweida has lost confidence in the Syrian Government and its judicial sector in particular. The limited capacity of the Government of Syria to deal with law-and-order challenges in As-Sweida and other areas facing rising crime (real or perceived) may threaten its already-tenuous legitimacy, and the resulting void in security may draw in other, even less accountable state security agencies and empower the local armed groups to which they are linked. The confluence of endemic crime, an absence of justice, and the potential for exploitation by other state branches are likely to threaten community stability and civil order in As-Sweida for the foreseeable future, and may be harbingers of what is to come for other Government-held territories as the state struggles to ‘win the peace’.



07 BRUSSELS

EU Foreign Affairs Council: No Normalisation, Reconstruction, or Sanctions Relief

On 24 January, the [EU Foreign Affairs Council](#) reiterated the EU’s stance [against](#) normalisation, reconstruction, and sanctions relief for the Government of Syria, conditional on a political solution to the conflict as per the conditions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The Council iterated that it would work with “like-minded partners” to “help the Syrian people and move the political process forward” as they prepare for the sixth Brussels Conference in May 2022. The meeting [included](#) discussions over “gradual, reciprocal, realistic, specific and verifiable steps” toward a political process under the framework of resolution 2254. [The Government of Syria Foreign Ministry](#) has condemned the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting, stating that it will not allow the EU

or any other entities to interfere with the process of bringing stability to the country.

Staying the course

The announcement effectively adopts a stay-the-course approach for European policy on Syria, despite growing pressure in some Member States to change tack or adjust the way aid is implemented in the country. Aid organisations should make note of the fact that although early recovery was not a major focus during the meeting, the EU is unlikely to block considered steps towards that goal, particularly as international donors weigh their options to scale-up aid to Syria despite funding shortfalls.

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.

A New Formation with the Merger of the 'Thaeroun Movement' and the 'Syrian Liberation Front'

What does it say? On 23 January, the two largest coalitions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army — the 'Thaeroun Movement' and the 'Syrian Liberation Front', each formed by the union of five smaller groups last year — announced their consolidation into a new umbrella coalition, the 'Revolutionary Liberation Committee'.

Reading between the lines: The establishment (and sundering) of umbrella coalitions has been a perennial pastime among the fractious factions of the armed opposition, with varied results; it is an open question whether this merger will last, or have any significant impact on the ground. However, it may reflect a general push toward greater consolidation on behalf of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and its Turkish backers as they seek to compete with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) for influence in Syria's northwest, as well as an effort to reduce infighting and increase security, all of which may in turn impact the aid delivery environment.

Source: Syria TV
Language: Arabic
Date: 23 January 2022

Lebanon Thwarts the Smuggling of a Shipment of the Drug Captagon to the Arab Gulf

What does it say? On 25 January, the Lebanese interior ministry announced that it had seized a seven-ton shipment of Syrian Captagon hidden in a tea consignment, likely destined for the Gulf via Togo.

Reading between the lines: The seizure of the shipment — which was apparently, and oddly, made after the ship on which it was carried was already three days out of the port of Beirut — highlights the overlapping challenges the region faces, as the twin crises of Syria's ongoing immiseration and Lebanon's economic collapse threaten to drag those countries' neighbours down with them while creating opportunities for criminal enterprise. The latter threat has in turn driven other regional actors to respond harshly. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has banned the import of Lebanese fruits and vegetables for fear of drug smuggling, putting Lebanese authorities between a rock and a hard place, and increasing pressure on an already-strained regional economy.

Source: Syria TV
Language: Arabic
Date: 25 January 2022

Syria, Russia start joint air force patrols over Syrian territory

What does it say? On 24 January, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that Russian Air Force and Syrian Arab Air Force (SyAAF) combat aircraft conducted their first-ever combined patrol of Syrian airspace, flying a route that included the Golan Heights, the Euphrates region, and northern Syria.

Reading between the lines: Taken in tandem with recent joint ground patrols of Lattakia Port (see [COAR Weekly Syria Update, 24 January 2022](#)), the air patrol may be a political signal by Russia about its future level of tolerance — or lack thereof — for Israeli strikes on Syrian territory. On a more prosaic level, Moscow is likely signalling that, after over ten years of grinding conflict which has taken a heavy toll on both aviators and airframes, the SyAAF (with Russian support) has taken advantage of the decline in major combat to return to such a state of readiness that it can spare the resources for routine combat air patrols.

Source: Reuters
Language: English
Date: 24 January 2022

The Internal Crossings... a Danger or an Economic Benefit for Northern Syria?

What does it say? Rumours spread on Syrian social media last week about the possible opening of cross-line crossings between the Syrian Government and opposition-controlled northwest Syria. While denied by Damascus, the opening of border crossings could pose risks – such as drug trafficking and currency manipulation – to northwest Syria, but could also provide economic benefits.

Reading between the lines: The potential opening of cross-line crossings will continue to be a politically and economically sensitive issue. However, it is an eventuality that both authorities and aid actors should plan for.

Source: Enab Baladi
Language: Arabic
Date: 23 January 2022

A Dam in Syria Was on a 'No-Strike' List. The U.S. Bombed It Anyway.

What does it say? During fighting between the IS and the US-supported SDF at Tabqa Dam in 2017, the secretive US special operations Task Force 9 bypassed normal procedures to call in airstrikes on the dam, despite the fact it was on a no-strike list – part of a pattern of behaviour by TF9 in which it routinely bypassed safeguards meant to protect civilians in the fight against the IS.

Reading between the lines: The NYT's ongoing investigation into TF9's record of risky – arguably reckless – strikes, and the lack of efforts by the US military to hold them accountable, indicates not only the limitations of military procedures intended to protect civilians, but also of IHL itself in modern population-centric war.

Source: New York Times
Language: English
Date: 20 January 2022

Universal Periodic Review Report On the Syrian Arab Republic

What does it say? After nearly 11 years of conflict, women in Syria face compounding gender-specific challenges, including food insecurity, sexual exploitation and trafficking, GBV, and HLP access issues. The report provides recommendations for action emphasising a stable post-conflict Syria is impossible without the full participation of women.

Reading between the lines: Events in recent weeks have highlighted the way in which issues particularly affecting women, such as domestic violence, will be critical challenges in any post-conflict order. As military action continues to decline, such issues will become even more salient in the aid response and political developments.

Source: The Syrian Women's Political Movement
Language: English
Date: 19 January 2022

Sharjah Chamber, Syria discuss enhancing trade exchange

What does it say? On 24 January, the Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UAE) received a delegation from the Syrian Consul-General to Dubai. Opportunities for trade, economic partnerships, and private sector investment between the two countries' business communities were discussed during the meeting.

Reading between the lines: While nothing momentous appears to have come out of the meeting, its occurrence – and the positive spin by Sharjah 24 – are indicators of growing momentum for not only the political normalisation but also the economic reintegration of Syria with the rest of the region.

Source: Sharjah 24
Language: English
Date: 24 January 2022

Fueling Addiction: How Importers And Politicians Keep Lebanon Hooked On Oil

What does it say? The study minutely lays out how politically connected holding companies control the oil sector in Lebanon.

Reading between the lines: Crisis responders in Syria focusing on energy and cross-border trade must track policy shifts in Lebanon's energy sector, which will impact downstream supply in Syria.

Source: Triangle
Language: English
Date: 13 January

Assad Is Here to Stay

What does it say? His rule secured by Russian and Iranian arms, and amid perceptions of US retreat from the Mideast compounded by a burgeoning regional economic crisis, regional normalisation is gaining momentum, and it has become clear that al-Assad is not going anywhere. However, the US and its allies can still work at the margins to make the best of a bad hand by preventing the forced return of Syrian refugees, providing humanitarian aid, and prosecuting violators in Western countries.

Reading between the lines: While its subtitle – “But the United States Can Still Try to Hold Him to Account” – is provocative, the article's conclusions and recommendations are not, reflecting the growing recognition of the shrinking realm of the possible in which those wishing to apply leverage against the Government of Syria must operate. The article correctly highlights the central role of aid in this context.

Source: Foreign Affairs
Language: English
Date: 25 January 2022

'Gay' Marriage in Lattakia Raises Controversy... What Does the Law Say?

What does it say? Local social media reported that authorities intervened to stop a wedding ceremony at the Hittin Football Club hall and arrested several attendees after the bride was discovered to be male. The club denied responsibility in a statement saying the hall has been commercially leased for many years, and the incident is the responsibility of the lessee.

Reading between the lines:

The incident demonstrates the repression faced by members of the LGBTQ+ community in Government-held Syria. Syria's legal code and repressive political system criminalise homosexuality and outlaw most forms of LGBTQ+ activism and mobilisation. This is compounded by social hostility towards LGBTQ+ individuals (See: [LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector](#)). As aid sector involvement in Government-held areas stands to increase in the near future, programming sensitivity in this area will be a critical requirement.

Source: [Enab Baladi](#)

Language: Arabic

Date: 23 January 2022

Japan contributes \$2 million to help Syrian children and families cope amid harsh winter

What does it say? Japan has donated 2 million USD to UNICEF's emergency response fund, which is expected to provide 150,000 people in Syria with access to clean water, hygiene, and healthcare during winter.

Reading between the lines: This is certainly an important contribution and of a similar scale to other recent grants by donors such as the EU. However, with UNICEF's annual budgetary needs in Syria running into the hundreds of millions of dollars, it primarily serves to highlight the vast levels of funding still required to meet humanitarian need even as the conflict transitions to a less kinetic phase.

Source: [UNICEF \(via Reliefweb\)](#)

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