

Syria Update

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Swelling As-Sweida Protests Highlight Discontent Across Government Areas

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Syrian Opposition Groups Bid for Unity against al-Assad

Syrian opposition groups met in Qatar to express unity, with visible limitations. [Pg 6](#)

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Despite increased tensions and risks to civilians in recent weeks, progress on challenges around al-Hol remains opaque. [Pg 6](#)

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Two girls join the thousands of casualties caused by explosive remnants of war. [Pg 7](#)

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Increasingly common, the strikes present risks for civilians and aid programmes. [Pg 8](#)

Demonstrators gather in As-Sweida Governorate in some of the largest public demonstrations in Government-held Syria since 2020. Image courtesy of Risalah Post.



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.

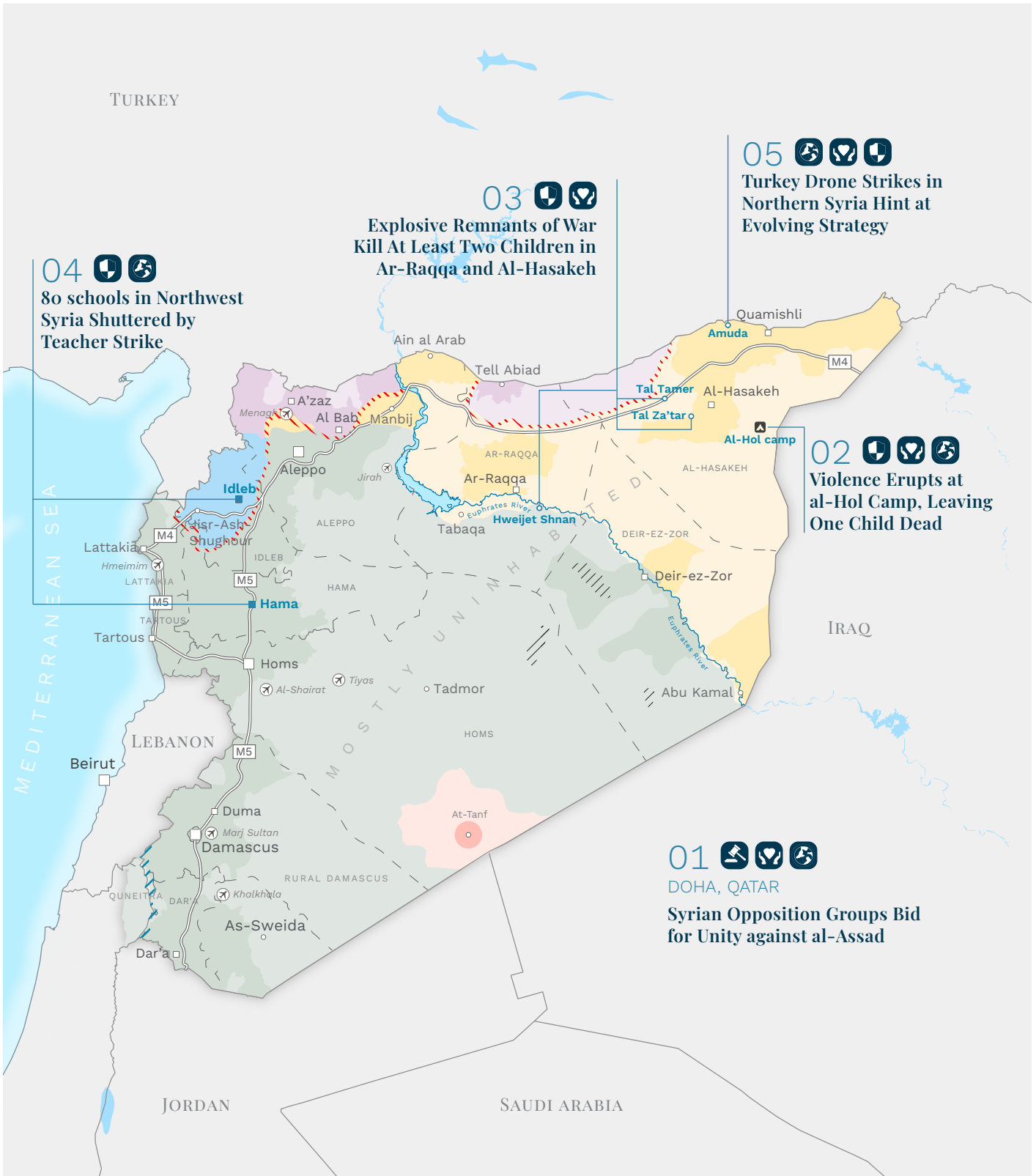
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The following is a brief synopsis of the *In-Depth Analysis* section:

Protests have continued to escalate for the second consecutive week in the predominantly Druze As-Sweida Governorate, sparked by the Government of Syria's decision to boot some 600,000 beneficiaries from its subsidy rolls, depriving them of state support for basic staples. The protests have been enabled by As-Sweida's special relationship with Damascus, but the frustrations being vocalised are hardly unique to the south. Syrians describe life in Government-held areas as "unbearable", with demonstrations reflecting the continuing deterioration of humanitarian conditions and popular discontent unlikely to abate any time soon. Donor governments should see the events as evidence of deeper grievances that are harboured across Government-held areas of Syria.

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

- 01 On 6 February, Syrian opposition parties met in Doha to unite efforts against the Syrian Government. The steps proposed are a far cry from unity, and the actors involved will struggle to overcome factionalism to gain real leverage over Damascus.
- 02 SDF guards opened fire on residents of al-Hol camp after women and children attacked them with rocks and knives. The status of camp residents remains a pressing concern. Repatriation of foreigners and increased support to deal with Iraqi and Syrian residents will be key to blunting the appeal of the issue as a rallying cry for IS sympathisers.
- 03 Two girls were killed and several children wounded by explosive remnants of war in eastern Syria. Their deaths highlight the high levels of contamination, which remain a key risk across Syria, even as donors sidestep the issue amid coordination and capacity issues.
- 04 On 5 February, a protest of dozens of volunteer teachers prompted the closure of more than 80 schools in HTS-controlled areas in Idleb and Hama. The closures will leave children with few options and will drive them to perilous work or military recruitment.
- 05 Turkish drone strikes have been reported in several areas of northeast Syria since 5 February. As rhetoric of a Turkish ground invasion wanes, drone tactics have become a mainstay of Turkey's intervention model in Syria, posing risks for priority areas for aid delivery.



Population Density

- Major city (750,000+)
 - City (100,000+)
 - Town (25,000+)
 - ▲ IDP Camp
 - - Governorate
 - Ⓜ Military airbase
- 100 km

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

Public protests have continued to escalate for the second consecutive week in the predominantly Druze As-Sweida Governorate. The protests are perhaps the most significant to take place in Government-held Syria since June 2020, when frustration over the collapse of the Syrian pound brought down Prime Minister Imad Khamis (see: [Syria Update 15 June 2020](#)). The recent demonstrations were sparked by the Government of Syria's decision to boot some 600,000 beneficiaries from its subsidy rolls, depriving them of state support for basic staples (see: [Syria Update 7 February 2022](#)). In a rare show of unity, a diverse cross-section of the community, including the region's [powerful religious leadership](#) as well as nominally apolitical protestors, have turned out over grievances as diverse as chronic [local insecurity](#), the stalled implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and a worsening cost-of-living crisis. Syrian authorities have scrambled to mollify demonstrators, but without substantive offers — or decisive force — all such steps have failed.

The protests have been enabled by As-Sweida's special relationship with Damascus, but the frustrations being vocalised are hardly unique to the south. Syrians [describe life](#) in Government-held areas as “unbearable” amid subsidy cuts and service shortages, particularly in the fuel and electricity needed to contend with winter conditions. In that respect, As-Sweida acts as a megaphone, and the protests amplify the vexation over the continued deterioration of humanitarian conditions across Government-held areas. It is difficult to imagine the Government of Syria long tolerating open shows of defiance. As of writing, however, its response has been limited, and [security forces in the governorate have been reinforced](#) but have so far refrained from harsh crackdowns or large-scale arrests. All told, the events are indicative of the Syrian state's diminished capacity to meet popular demands and needs.

What's driving dissent?

The protests reflect the deepening impact of long-running state capacity challenges that have thrust greater costs upon ordinary Syrians. Acute winterisation challenges now confront populations across Government areas. They are in part a consequence of subsidy cuts that reduced allocations and raised market prices, including for diesel used as heating fuel (see: [Syria Update 19 July 2021](#)). Ballooning transportation costs, a consequence of shrinking petrol subsidies,

have eaten into consumers' pocketbooks both directly (rising taxi fares) and indirectly (increasing market prices for goods transported across the country). In a rare attempt to redirect services to needy civilian populations, the Syrian state [shuttered public buildings](#) from 23–27 January to channel energy to “services for citizens” amid harsh winter conditions. Characteristically, state media pinned blame for the shortfalls on “oppressive economic measures” imposed from abroad, an implicit swipe at foreign sanctions.

Another factor in popular anger is the seemingly violent turn in the war economy, as competition over resources drives increasingly desperate actions. Kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and deadly border clashes are not new to Syria, but recent events have attracted outsized attention. For instance, kidnappers in Dar'a recently [demanded a ransom](#) of 200,000 USD for the release of a child abducted in November. Armed gangs and bedouin smuggling rings have long traversed southern Syria to reach Jordan, but the narcotics trade has grown increasingly violent. Deadly border clashes between smugglers and Jordanian border forces are growing more frequent and intense as Amman's patience wears thin (see: [Syria Update 7 February 2022](#)). Communities have suffered, as the events have drawn unwanted attention from security actors and the international community, all while impeding Syria's role as a linchpin in legitimate trade across the region.

Tick, tock: social media mediates long-running dissatisfaction

So far, governmental responses to the demonstrations have foundered. The Syrian Government has refrained from harshly cracking down in As-Sweida, but violent repression of the demonstrations remains possible, despite the state's assurances that [reinforcements](#) have been deployed merely as a deterrent to criminal action. Bouthaina Shaaban, political advisor to President Bashar al-Assad, has [blamed](#) the unrest on Israeli ‘agents’ and called on locals not to fall into the trap by “weakening national resolve” in the face of the crises imposed on Syria by external actors.

Nonetheless, it will be difficult for Syria's central authorities to navigate popular demands, given the rainbow coalition that has come out against Damascus, as social media has focused heavily on the events. A leading member of the Druze religious establishment, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, has [backed](#) the protesters' demands. Notably, local sources indicate that

As-Sweida acts as a megaphone, and the protests amplify the vexation over the continued deterioration of humanitarian conditions across Government-held areas.

nominally apolitical locals have also joined demonstrations, pointing to the broader appeal of the demands. These include the [implementation of the UNSC Resolution 2254](#), which seeks a political resolution to the conflict.

What's next in As-Sweida?

Currently, there are no indications that the Syrian Government will attempt to quell protests by executing major changes in policy or personnel. Authorities may be biding time for events to run their course. The balance may shift from appeasement to coercion if demonstrations do not dissipate of their own accord. Donor governments should take note of several key considerations. First, such demonstrations reflect the continuing deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Syria. Greater emphasis on resilience and recovery programming will be necessary to keep pace with growing needs as aid portfolios shrink. Second, to that end, popular discontent is unlikely to abate. The wholesale deterioration of services and infrastructure in Syria likely cements the relevance of such grievances for the long term. Finally, outside actors watching the events for signs that the Government of Syria will adapt course in response to popular demands should not hold out hope for change.

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 DOHA, QATAR

Syrian Opposition Groups Bid for Unity against al-Assad

On 6 February, representatives from various Syrian opposition factions convened a two-day symposium in Doha on the future of the crisis in Syria. The event, “Whither Syria?”, headed by dissident former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab, aimed to unify the ambitions of the political opposition and produce a comprehensive plan to address needs inside the country. The conference participants issued 17 recommendations for opposition forces and parties broadly focused on preserving Syria’s geographical unity, restructuring opposition groups and improving communication between them, and seeking the expertise of think tanks and academics in Syria and abroad.

Too little, too late?

The symposium addresses some of the key political questions surrounding next steps in Syria, but its outputs are hampered by opposition divisions, Syria’s political stalemate, and a lack of on-the-ground influence inside Syria. Among other principles, the event communicate emphasised the need for “decentralised local governance” to allocate funding locally, a key issue of interest for aid implementers (see: 'Arrested Development': Rethinking Local Development in Syria) and the need to prevent regional normalisation, reconstruction, and aid diversion.

Nonetheless, the event highlights the continued polarisation of opposition movements. Only groups in good standing with Ankara and with the Turkish-backed Syrian Opposition Coalition were in attendance for the conference. Notably, the Autonomous Administration was absent. Without operating in lock step, all such actors lose influence over Damascus. Deep-seated factionalism has long impaired the Syrian opposition. Coordination is welcome. Nonetheless, the international community should be wary of staking hopes for change on such initiatives, which lack on-the-ground force to convert their ambitions into action.



02 AL-HOL CAMP, AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE

Violence Erupts at al-Hol Camp, Leaving One Child Dead

On 8 February, media sources reported that security guards at al-Hol camp in northeast Syria opened fire on residents after women residents attacked them with rocks and knives. A 10-year-old child was killed in the shooting, and several women and children were wounded. The security forces were responding to a tent fire, possibly set deliberately to lure the forces into the foreigners’ annex. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched a campaign of raids in response and arrested a group of women. The incident took place in a section housing roughly 10,000 foreign women and children who have been stuck in limbo since the SDF retook northeast Syria from the Islamic State (IS) in 2019.

On borrowed time

Tensions have been elevated in al-Hol since the attack led by IS fighters on al-Sina’a prison in Al-Hasakeh city (see: Syria Update 31 January 2022). Actors across the region may draw inspiration from IS’s surprising success in overmanning the SDF and overrunning the prison. The events should be a clarion call for donor governments and aid implementers. Despite the events at al-Sina’a prison, few nations have come forward with a coherent approach to deal with their IS-linked nationals who are housed in Syria’s camps, to say nothing of the majority Iraqi and Syrian camp populations.

Kurdish forces in northeast Syria understand that the camps are a pressure point with foreign donors. They have used their capacity limitations in dealing with such populations as a political wedge and a pretext for increased donor support. Western states have the greatest capacity to re-integrate women and children and to support deradicalisation programmes. Developed nations should not expect the SDF to deal with populations they themselves are unwilling to engage with, often for political reasons. Whatever the status of foreign women and children, majority Iraqi and Syrian populations pose a separate challenge that is increasingly

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03 HWEIJET SHNAN, AR-RAQQA GOVERNORATE AND TAL ZA'TAR AND TAL TAMER, AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE

Explosive Remnants of War Kill At Least Two Children in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh

According to reports by [Syria TV](#) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights ([SOHR](#)) on 6 February, explosive remnants of war (ERW) detonations have killed at least two children and wounded several others in at least three separate incidents in eastern Syria recently. A six-year-old girl was reportedly killed and her brother seriously wounded in an explosion in Government-controlled Hweijet Shnan, southeast of Ar-Raqqa city, while two other recent incidents, in Tal Za'tar and near Tal Tamer, both in SDF-controlled Al-Hasakeh, injured four and killed one child among children herding sheep. It is unclear if the ERW involved in each incident were unexploded ordnance (UXO), landmines, or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). ERW have killed 12 people and wounded 17 in Syria so far in 2022, and have [killed](#) thousands since the start of the conflict.

A deadly sowing, a tragic reaping

While contamination from ERWs is estimated to threaten one in two Syrians, designing and implementing effective programmes to offset such risks presents challenges. Landmines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices each require specialised skill sets and equipment, all of which are in short supply. Projects to date have focused on major roadways, key infrastructure, and areas of military priority, to the detriment of residential areas and lands used for herding and agriculture. Scaling up support is a challenge, owing to limited partnership options and red lines that inhibit cooperation with authorities, who act as gatekeepers to contaminated areas. Conflict sensitivity and do-no-harm considerations are also complicating factors. For instance, the partial removal of explosive hazards could incentivise competition over newly safe land. Housing, land and property (HLP), refugee and IDP return, service provision, public works, and agriculture are also impacted by this issue. These factors should inform the aid response to better alleviate, rather than compound, harm.



04 IDLEB, HAMA

80 schools in Northwest Syria Shuttered by Teacher Strike

On 5 February, a teachers' strike demanding rights for staff and adequate funding closed down 80 schools in Idleb and Hama. The protests, dubbed "Teachers' strike for dignity", brought together educators who had gone without pay for three years. The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-affiliated Salvation Government Ministry of Education continues to cover schools' administrative salary costs while [relying](#) on more than 4,000 volunteers, who are in turn [forced to seek](#) support directly from the community. Donor-funded and international organisations have provided variable support to schools in the northwest, but this support has become increasingly challenging amid concerns over encroachment in the sector by HTS and the Salvation Government. The protestors called on both authorities and humanitarian organisations to address the issue, lest students go without a chance at an education.

Waning options

The complex realities of support for education have long vexed donors in Syria, yet this should not overshadow the fact that as education options wane in areas controlled by HTS, parents are increasingly compelled to keep children out of school or enrol them in free HTS-affiliated religious schools. Over 40 such schools are present in HTS areas, [enrolling](#) more than 13,500 students. Donors have often expressed concern over HTS's ambition to control the education sector and shape the moral perspectives of Syrian youth. The disappearance of relatively independent public options all but guarantees that children will be driven into HTS-affiliated alternatives, or forego education altogether. Not only does school closure deprive youth of an education, but it may also push them into the workforce, including violent and unsafe sectors, while heightening their susceptibility to radicalisation. Such challenges are particularly palpable in IDP camps, where [illiteracy rates](#) have reached as high as 40 percent, and options for a better, more sustainable future for residents are few and far between.

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05 AMUDA, AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE

Turkey Drone Strikes in Northern Syria Hint at Evolving Strategy

On 9 February, Turkish drone [strikes](#) reportedly struck areas of Amuda in northern Al-Hasakeh Governorate. The strike followed a similar attack on 5 February, [reportedly](#) killing 14 fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). According to Ankara, the 5 February strikes targeted cells of the PKK-aligned Revolutionary Youth branch who were planning to orchestrate attacks on Turkish positions in Syria. Each attack occurred in areas controlled by the SDF, sparking fears among nearby residents and [limiting](#) civilian mobility.

Drawing down while scaling up

The reliance on armed drones distances Ankara from its threats of a ground offensive into SDF-controlled areas of Syria (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). Turkish drone strikes in northeast Syria are not new, however; at least 20 were [documented](#) in 2021, in many cases injuring and killing civilians. A full-scale Turkish incursion is currently unlikely, and the use of drones allows Turkish forces to continue to achieve more limited objectives through smaller-scale, targeted interventions. The strikes present risks to civilians as they commonly occur along major highways and in city centres. The threat of continued strikes risks upending aid programmes or jeopardising implementers, particularly in areas such as Ain al Arab (Kobani), Quamishli city, Amuda, and Tal Tamer.

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.

Sanctions Evasion Tactics in Syria

What does it say? The report, prepared with the Syrian Legal Development Programme, outlines the mechanisms by which sanctioned entities in Syria circumvent sanctions, such as through shell corporations and informal money transfers, sometimes with the collusion of other regional countries.

Reading between the lines: Sanctions are an imperfect tool that those with money and power are able to work around, significantly reducing their effectiveness. Indeed, sanctions risk binding such individuals more closely to the Assad regime, bolstering its dominance over the country’s elites.

Source: Baytna
Language: Arabic
Date: 31 January 2022

Israel strikes Syria in response to anti-aircraft fire

What does it say? The Israeli military said it carried out a counter-strike in Syria in response to an anti-aircraft missile, which triggered sirens in parts of Israel and the occupied West Bank, and exploded in mid-air. The Israeli strike targeted scientific research centres at four locations in the Damascus countryside.

Reading between the lines: The event suggests that the Israel-Russia arrangement of allowing Israel to strike Syria still holds despite recent speculation over a rupture between Damascus and Moscow concerning Israeli attacks.

Source: Reuters
Language: English
Date: 9 February 2022

Inside the U.S.-Russia Deal that Eases Pressure on Assad

What does it say? The article discusses the latest of what it describes as the US and the West’s “series of incremental concessions” to Russia. The deal will reduce the number of UN Security Council debates on Syria’s chemical weapons, as well as the number of meetings to discuss Syria’s political transition.

Reading between the lines: US policy appears to be undergoing a subtle shift away from maximum pressure on the Assad regime and towards early recovery and humanitarian interests, but such an emphasis is a practical concession to reality, not a fundamental shift vis-a-vis Damascus.

Source: Foreign Policy
Language: English
Date: 8 February 2022

ISIS influence waning as group searches for new leader, say experts

What does it say? IS must choose a new leader following the killing of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi in a US raid. Although the IS theoretically requires the “caliph” to meet three criteria, al-Qurayshi failed to meet two of the three.

Reading between the lines: Such narrow thinking concerning IS is proof of its diminished capacity to inspire dread. Nonetheless, although it is unlikely to re-establish a territorial base, its sleeper cells and lone wolves can cause instability and chaos.

Source: [The National](#)
Language: English
Date: 9 February 2022

Factsheet: Syria’s Industrial Cities

What does it say? The paper provides an overview of Syria’s industrial cities, located in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Deir-ez-Zor. They were built in the 2000s to attract large-scale industrial projects and increase the export of high-value-added industrial products.

Reading between the lines:

Lacking the capital to invest in manufacturing capabilities, the revival and development of Syria’s industrial base will be dependent on significant foreign investment, which has not been forthcoming.

Source: [Syria Report](#)
Language: English
Date: 8 February 2022

12-year Sentence for a French Citizen Who Fought with an Extremist Organisation in Syria

What does it say? The man, who was arrested in Turkey and deported to France, was convicted of joining Jabhat al-Nusra and committing war crimes against the Yazidi minority in Syria.

Reading between the lines:

European states continue, albeit slowly, to prosecute citizens who have returned after fighting in Syria, yet many remain in detention centres in northern Syria and swifter action is needed to avoid shocks like the Sina’a Prison break.

Source: [France en Arabe](#)
Language: Arabic
Date: 9 February 2022

Syrian Military Commander: The US Administration is Seeking to Add Turkey-sponsored Factions to Terrorist Lists

What does it say? An SDF commander claimed that the US is considering adding Turkish-sponsored factions in northwest Syria to its list of foreign terrorist organisations. According to the commander, war crimes committed by the groups are an embarrassment to the US.

Reading between the lines: Though speculative, such a move would strain US-Turkish coordination over Syria, which has already been upset by Turkey’s actions in northeast Syria and its purchase of Russian surface-to-air missile systems. The US applied sanctions in July 2021 to a Turkish-backed group, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, over alleged war crimes.

Source: [North Press Agency](#)
Language: Arabic
Date: 9 February 2022

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Contact:
syria-update@coar-global.org



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