

Syria Update

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

‘Terrorism’ Amnesty Is Wartime Syria’s Most Sweeping

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW

Turkish President Announces Plan to Repatriate One Million Syrian Refugees

The new plan affirms that Turkey is in the driver’s seat on regional return issues. [Pg 6](#)

US Report Provides Limited Information on al-Assad Family Wealth

The widely criticised report, drawing on open-source data, likely significantly underestimates al-Assad’s net worth. [Pg 6](#)

Major Cryptocurrency Platform Bans Syrian Accounts

The move puts crypto and blockchain technologies further out of reach. [Pg 7](#)

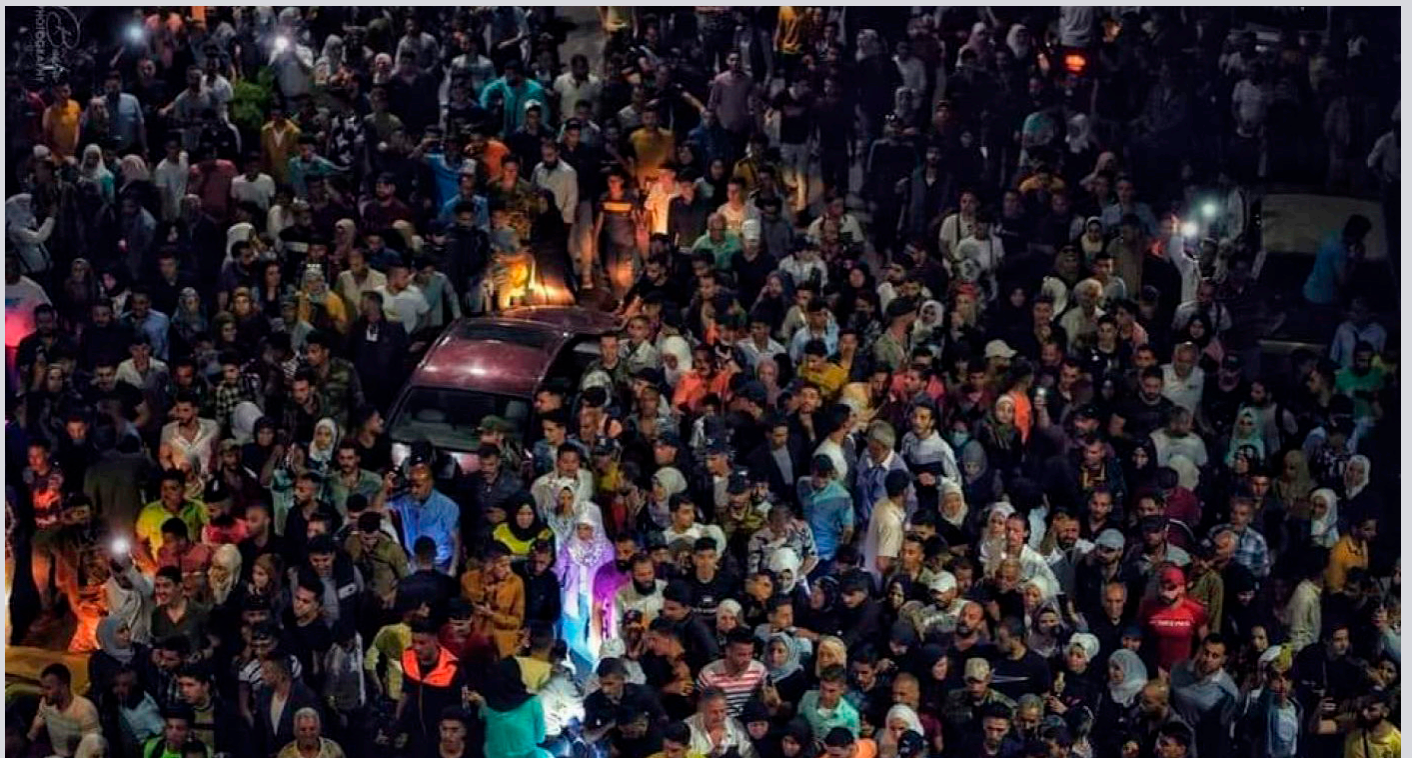
Dar’a Woman’s Assassination Affirms Rising Tribal Tensions in Syria’s South

A woman was targeted for the first time in Tafas during the ongoing assassination operations in the governorate. [Pg 7](#)

Al-Assad Appoints New Defence Minister and Army Chief of Staff

The appointments are important, but no revolutionary changes are expected. [Pg 8](#)

Syrians gathered in large numbers in Damascus awaiting news of whether their imprisoned loved ones would be released following a general amnesty for terrorism crimes. Image courtesy of Middle East Eye.



WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST



**Crisis in Ukraine:
Impacts for Syria**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine risks upending the delicate status quo in Syria, another site of proxy conflict involving many of the same parties now at odds in Eastern Europe. This report explores the impacts that have already been felt in Syria, and it looks ahead to others that are still to come.

[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 30 April, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 7, a general amnesty for terrorism crimes. Anecdotal and local media reports indicate that hundreds of Syrians have already been released from detention, and more continue to be freed. The amnesty is arguably the most significant of the conflict, and the Government of Syria hopes to leverage it as part of “a comprehensive national reconciliation.” Donors and aid practitioners should view the outsize public response to the amnesty — as desperate families fill public squares across Government-held Syria — as evidence of the abiding need for a more honest reckoning with the events of the war and as a dimension of future social cohesion and intercommunal reconciliation work to be done. It is probable that more detainees will be released under the order, yet as with past amnesties, many Syrian families will walk away without satisfaction. All told, the events demonstrate a degree of savvy on the part of Damascus, which has seldom if ever made concessions of this magnitude to its political opponents. What remains to be seen is whether more steps will follow and how officials expect to manage Syrians’ hopes — and inevitable disappointments — in the future.

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

- 01 On 3 April, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced Ankara’s plan for the voluntary return of one million Syrian refugees to their country. While the plan is no news, little is clear about its underlying drivers or its feasibility.
- 02 On 28 April, the US Department of State released a report estimating the net worth of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his family at between 1 and 2 billion USD. The figure has been criticised as almost certainly an underestimate, based on open-source data that has not been corroborated.
- 03 Binance, one of the largest cryptocurrency exchange platforms in the world, confirmed new policies to close Syrian accounts on 28 April, based on recommendations from the UN Security Council and the UN Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). The decision could foreshadow limitations to tech-based solutions for getting funds into hard-to-reach areas with high levels of humanitarian need such as Syria.
- 04 On 1 May, media sources reported that a woman, Sabah al-Baradan, was the target of an assassination in Tafas, western Dar’a Governorate. The assassination marks the first killing of a woman in the region, pointing to escalating violence and, potentially, tribal discord.
- 05 On 28 April, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad appointed Major General Ali Mahmoud Abbas as Syria’s Minister of Defence. While unlikely to represent a comprehensive shift in the Syrian military establishment, reshuffling within the upper echelons of the military apparatus is a potential indication of subtle changes in approach.

02

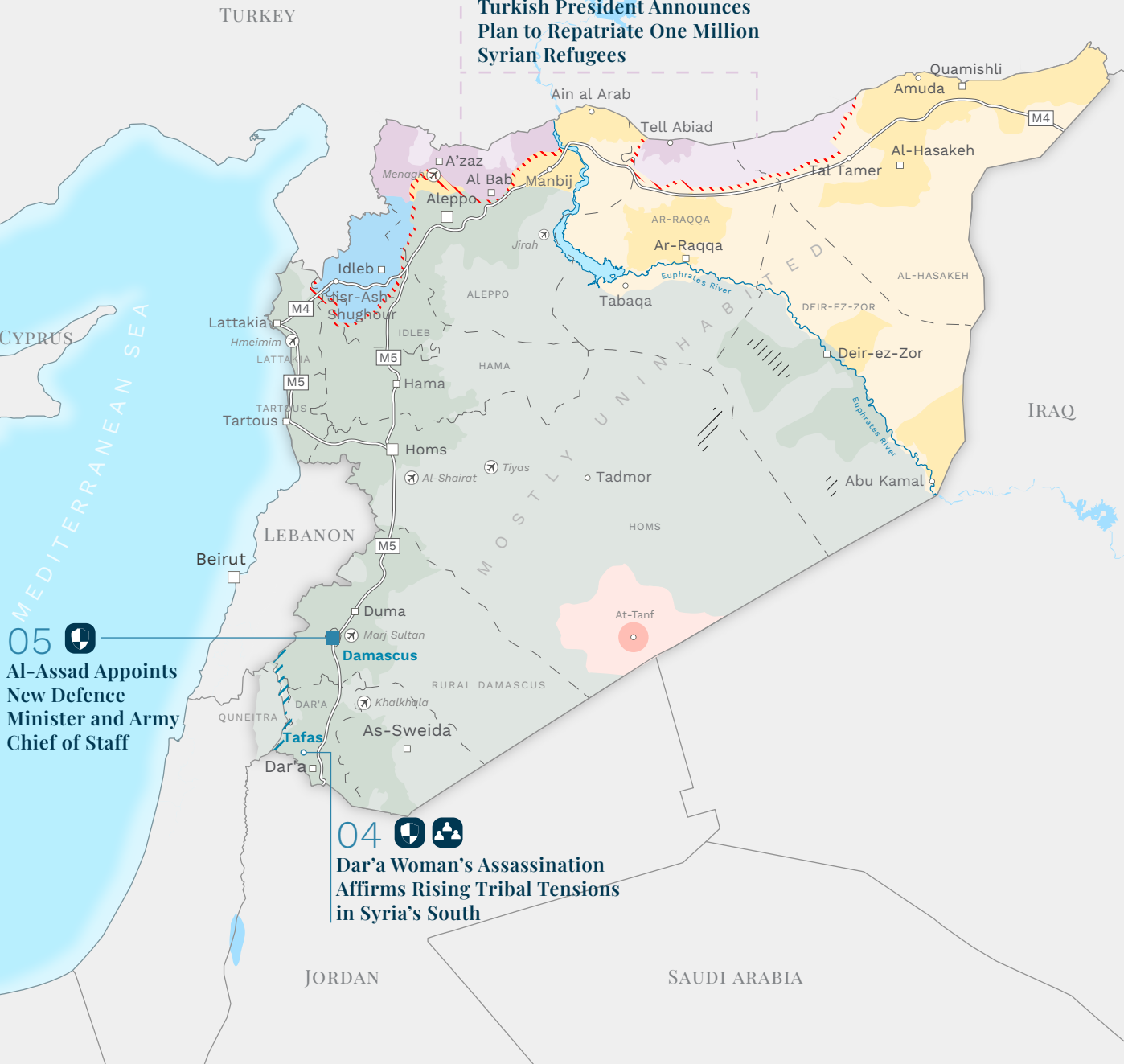
WASHINGTON, DC
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NORTHERN SYRIA
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05

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04

Dar'a Woman's Assassination Affirms Rising Tribal Tensions in Syria's South

Population Density

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

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 30 April, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 7 (2022), a general amnesty for specially designated terrorism crimes. As of writing, no official figures concerning the number of detainees released under the order have been published, but anecdotal and local media reports put the number in the hundreds, and growing. News of the announcement has prompted the families of many of Syria's [estimated 150,000 detained and missing persons](#) to hold vigil in public squares, while others have anxiously followed military transports carrying released detainees, hoping to encounter loved ones.

The amnesty is arguably the most substantive concession the Government of Syria has made to its political or military opponents since the conflict began. It is, moreover, the first amnesty to address specific terrorism crimes, and Syrian Justice Minister Ahmad al-Sayyed [has presented](#) it as the backbone of a nationwide reckoning, describing it as “a comprehensive national reconciliation for all the people of the country.” While the manoeuvre has yet to soften al-Assad’s domestic image, particularly given [poor expectation management](#), it is an important signal. In that respect, it should be viewed as a sign that the Syrian Government is willing to enact middle measures under the guise of justice and accountability, areas to which Western governments have devoted increasing attention as other conflict-era political objectives fade from view.

What happened?

The measure is the most sweeping amnesty to be issued in wartime Syria, and it likely marks the first time that significant numbers of detainees have been released from the [infamous Sednaya Military Prison](#), home to as many as 20,000 prisoners, and a site administered by the Ministry of Defence and Military Police. Specifically, the decree grants amnesty for “terrorist crimes”, [described by](#) Syrian Deputy Minister of Justice Nizar Sadeqni as actions including the planning, training, or financing of acts of terrorism, as seen by the Syrian state. The amnesty makes a specific exception for actions that led to human death, as designated under Syria’s Counter-Terrorism Law No. 19 (2012). Law No. 19 has seen use as the broad legal basis for a constellation of wartime arrests, asset seizures targeting former opposition fighters and the displaced, and abuses of civilians aligned with the political opposition. Many demonstrators and other advocates for peaceful change

have been brought to heel under the Counter-Terrorism Law.

Who has been released?

Local sources in southern Syria indicate that most of the detainees who have been released under the amnesty in that part of the country to date had been arrested after the region’s piecemeal reconciliation in July 2018. However, additional local sources also confirm at least one case in which an individual arrested in 2011 – and long feared dead – has been freed under the order. At the time of writing, releases are ongoing, and relevant state authorities will reportedly continue to process and facilitate additional releases, without action on the part of affected individuals. Officials have stated that arrest orders for individuals wanted under relevant crimes have been effectively cancelled.

What are its limitations?

The amnesty is potentially sweeping in scope, but it does admit of limitations. Critically, the amnesty offers no protection from prosecution on grounds other than terrorism, a glaring oversight given that the risks inherent to Syria’s legal landscape are compounded by the possibility of civil litigation over wartime actions. For instance, in 2018 former Liwa al-Awwal commander Samir Shahrour was arrested over a civil case brought by a prominent Barzeh lawyer whose brother Shahrour had allegedly killed early in the conflict (see: [Syria Update October 2018](#)). Another peculiar feature of the Syrian legal arena presents further risk: field courts martial. Syrians remain subject to seemingly limitless legal jeopardy under Syria’s decades-old [court martial law](#), which permits prosecution without appeal by an ad-hoc military tribunal. The system was instituted to try military cases, but [has been used](#) against civilians during the conflict.


Looking ahead

Whatever its ultimate motivations, the Syrian Government has clearly deployed the amnesty to build good will. Its timing – coinciding with Eid al-Fitr, a celebratory holiday which marks the end of Ramadan with acts of charity – should not be overlooked. The announcement may also be timed to distract from new reports of Government of Syria atrocities. It follows shortly after the publication of a damning [Guardian investigation backed by video](#) footage purportedly showing the killing of 41 civilians by Government of Syria forces in Tadamon in 2013.

Donors and aid practitioners should see the public response to the amnesty announcement as a sign of the abiding need for greater reckoning with the events of wartime Syria as a dimension of social cohesion and intercommunal reconciliation. That Syrians have crowded public places across Government-held areas, in some cases being dispersed by security forces, stands as evidence of the emotional impact aroused by the issue of the detained and missing in Syria. Detainees will likely continue to be released under the order, yet as with past amnesties, many Syrian families will be turned away without satisfaction.

Western governments have paid increasing attention to issues of transitional justice, accountability, and legal prosecutions. Given the grim underlying realities, more attention should also be paid to efforts to prompt disclosure, remembrance, and memorialisation. Regrettably, in the case of Syria's missing, the obstacles to be overcome are staggering. The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria has determined that the use of arbitrary detention and arrest to suppress dissent is "a hallmark of the conflict." It is estimated that some 130,000 Syrians have been arrested by or otherwise disappeared at the hands of the Government of Syria alone.

All told, the amnesty demonstrates a degree of savvy on the part of Damascus, which has seldom made substantive concessions to its opponents. The releases may signify the Government of Syria's willingness to take a first, admittedly small, step to turn the page on the current stage of the conflict, albeit on its own terms. What remains to be seen is how officials expect to manage Syrians' hopes — and inevitable disappointments — in the future.

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WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 NORTHERN SYRIA

Turkish President Announces Plan to Repatriate One Million Syrian Refugees

On 3 May, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a new initiative to voluntarily return up to 1 million Syrians, in remarks made in a video address to inaugurate a Turkish-sponsored housing project in northern Syria. According to the Turkish newspaper Sabah, the eight-part plan will facilitate rehabilitation and infrastructure, including the creation of new housing units, schools, hospitals, mosques, and commercial spaces such as shops and markets. It also includes provisions for vocational training, educational activities, psychological support, and new job opportunities. The plan will also reportedly provide small loans, and it will focus on 13 areas that, according to Turkey, enjoy military and political stability and security, including A'zaz, Jarablus, Al-Bab, Tell Abiad, and Ras Al Ain. Although the precise mechanism by which the plan will be articulated is not yet clear, it will reportedly target cities with a high concentration of Syrians, such as Ankara, Istanbul, Konya, Adana, and Gaziantep. Ankara will also reportedly request support from various national and international sources, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Turkey Takes the Lead on Returns

The announced plan intensifies Turkey's emerging focus on refugee return (see: [Syria Update 3 May 2022](#)). This emphasis has been turbocharged by domestic political considerations and Turkey's continuing efforts to gain greater international support amid the protracted displacement crisis. While claims regarding the current stability and security of targeted communities in northern Syria are highly optimistic and mass voluntary return remains unlikely for the foreseeable future, Turkey's shifting approach — particularly the focus on infrastructure and rehabilitation — may tip the balance over time. It is not clear by what mechanism Syrians inside Turkey will be encouraged to return, but the creation of sustainable livelihood opportunities amid a building boom in northern Syria may prompt

Syrians, who often struggle for labour opportunities in Turkey, to seek opportunities in Turkish-influenced areas of Syria. Developments in the past month show that Turkey is not slowing down its efforts to generate momentum behind the return of refugees to Syria. The announcement further highlights how, in the absence of coherent Western-supported or UN-led processes for Syria's displacement crisis, regional actors will be forced to take the lead — on their own terms.



02 WASHINGTON, DC

US Report Provides Limited Information on al-Assad Family Wealth

On 28 April, the US Department of State released a report estimating the net worth of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his family at between 1 and 2 billion USD. The short report, mandated by the 2022 National Defence Authorization Act, has been widely criticised for its reliance on open-source information and media reporting, as well as its failure to engage with narcotics trafficking, considered by many to be a key source of revenue for the Assad regime. Matthew Zweig, who served as the senior sanctions adviser in the US Office of the Special Representative for Syria Engagement, called the report “a missed opportunity.”

Follow the money

The figure provided in the report has been criticised as almost certainly an underestimate, given the complex and opaque network of accounts, shell corporations, and property portfolios used by members of the Syrian regime to not only hide their assets from sanctions, but also the reality of their extraordinary wealth from Syria's struggling population. Financial investigations into the sources of regime and regime-aligned figures' wealth are important, and have previously offered pathways to criminal prosecution where investigations into war crimes have stalled for those otherwise thought untouchable, such as Bashar al-Assad's uncle Rifaat al-Assad (see: [Syria Update 19 October 2021](#)). More substantive investigations into the

sources of the al-Assad family's — and other regime members' — wealth are sorely needed. While members of the regime are implicated in the narco-economy, more work is needed to extract the details, including Bashar al-Assad's personal association (see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State](#)) and Assad regime figures are implicated, Bashar al-Assad's personal connections to narco-financing remain speculative.



03 WASHINGTON, DC

Major Cryptocurrency Platform Bans Syrian Accounts

On 28 April, Binance, one of the largest cryptocurrency exchange platforms in the world, [confirmed](#) new operating policies that led to the closure of accounts of Syrians using the platform. According to the exchange, the new policies followed recommendations from the UN Security Council and the US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

Blockchain for some

The decision has sparked widespread criticism for [profiling](#) Syrian users, just days after Binance announced the launch of a special 'Crypto refugee card' for Ukrainian refugees. However, its immediate tangible impact is less pronounced, as Syrians inside the country have long been blocked from accessing cryptocurrency platforms. The new policy, also restricts Syrians living abroad, including in Turkey and Lebanon, where cryptocurrencies have taken off amid economic turmoil. The timing of this decision is notable, given the US Treasury's ongoing efforts to implement broad sanctions exemptions through new general licences in some parts of Syria.

Isolation from cryptocurrency platforms in the near term will further constrict prospects for Syrians abroad to support family back home, making it even harder for average residents to meet basic needs. Donors and aid agencies may also find themselves limited by such decisions down the line, especially in light of growing interest in blockchain-based solutions for hard-to-reach areas and conflict zones. Tech-focused

development initiatives and digitally-minded donors would be well-served to study new pathways for reaching people in need. Thus far, widely implementable digital solutions have failed to materialise for Syrians, and the decision by Binance makes this even less likely in the near future.



04 TAFAS, DAR'A GOVERNORATE

Dar'a Woman's Assassination Affirms Rising Tribal Tensions in Syria's South

On 1 May, media sources [reported](#) that Sabah al-Baradan was assassinated in Tafas, Dar'a Governorate. She is believed to be the first woman killed in an ongoing series of assassinations in Dar'a Governorate since the 2018 reconciliation. Local sources indicated that al-Baradan was targeted due to roiling [tensions](#) among prominent tribes in Tafas, including the Zoubi, Kiwan, and Baradan. 51 were killed and 35 wounded in Dar'a Governorate in April — among them [civilians](#), former opposition fighters, and Government-affiliated soldiers.

Tribal Tensions

The assassination does not bode well for stability in southern Syria and is the high-water mark of recent tribal strife in Tafas and the wider region. There is no known direct link between the targeting of the woman and assassinations of former opposition fighters and Syrian Government forces. Nonetheless, tribes are an important and often overlooked social constituency in Dar'a, despite their relative marginalisation in recent years. Mounting strife between the tribes — including the Baradan, which head the Central Negotiations Committee — may add yet another dimension of instability in the region, which is already undermined by friction between the Government and opposition (see: [Syria Update 28 February 2022](#)). Aid actors planning and implementing projects in the south should expect continued violence in the region, in addition to heightened social cohesion challenges, particularly if reprisals escalate extant tensions (see: [Syria Update 18 April 2022](#)).



05 DAMASCUS

Al-Assad Appoints New Defence Minister and Army Chief of Staff

On 28 April, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad [issued](#) Decree No. 115 of 2022, appointing Major General Ali Mahmoud Abbas as Syria's Minister of Defence. In succeeding General Ali Abdullah Ayoub, who held the position since 2018, Abbas becomes the fifth defence minister since the uprising began in 2011. Relatedly, on 30 April, al-Assad [issued](#) Decree No. 122 of 2022 appointing Major General Abdul Karim Mahmoud Ibrahim as Chief of General Staff of the Syrian Army and Armed Forces, a post that had been vacant since 2018. Ibrahim [underwent](#) training courses in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands, and has held several leadership positions in the Syrian military.

Changing of the guard?

The appointments are procedural and unlikely to represent a comprehensive shift in the workings of the Syrian military establishment. However, any reshuffling within the upper echelons of the military apparatus is a potential indication that subtle changes in approach may be coming. To that end, Abbas's record of military training in several European countries has been noted as a possible signal of a turn away from hardline wartime military policies. Meanwhile, Ibrahim steps into a long-vacant role. Syrian media [have speculated](#) that Russia had pressured Damascus to keep the seat vacant in order to facilitate its own military influence, which it now struggles to exert given events in Ukraine. While all such theories are difficult to assess, any shifts to Syria's wartime footing will take time to manifest.

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.

Massacre in Tadamon: how two academics hunted down a Syrian war criminal

What does it say? The article describes how two academics living in Amsterdam, one Syrian and one Turkish, spent years tracking Syrian security personnel on Facebook to uncover the identity of the main perpetrators of the Tadamon massacre.

Reading between the lines: The Syrian Civil War has been called the first “social media war,” and crimes documented by activists and civilians are invaluable in the pursuit of justice. Nevertheless, as this case shows, pursuing accountability is a long and arduous process.

Source: [The Guardian](#)
Language: English
Date: 27 Apr 2022

Raids Target a Missile Launch Vase for Iranian Militias in Al Mayadin

What does it say? Planes believed to be affiliated with the International Coalition targeted Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps missile launchers located in the desert between the cities of Al Mayadin and Ashara, east of Deir-ez-Zor.

Reading between the lines: Tensions persist between the US-led International Coalition and Iran-backed forces in eastern Syria. While major conflict is unlikely, periodic bombardments and airstrikes are likely to continue.

Source: [Syria TV](#)
Language: Arabic
Date: 2 May 2022

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham hands over Islamic State jihadists to Turkey

What does it say? Several media sources have stated that Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has recently handed over 50 foreign militants to the Turkish authorities. Most of the militants were affiliated with Islamic State, with some belonging to Hurras al-Din.

Reading between the lines: The move is likely part of HTS’s continuing campaign to earn international goodwill and jettison its terrorist designation by proving its usefulness in the global war against terrorism.

Source: [Al-Monitor](#)
Language: English
Date: 26 April 2022

The Syrian Democratic Forces Arrest 100 Men in Ar-Raqqa for Conscription

What does it say? The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) detained and forcibly recruited 100 men in Ar-Raqqa during the final days of Ramadan.

Reading between the lines: This incident constitutes another effort by the SDF to swell its ranks in an attempt to replace the high number of defections. It conducted a similar campaign in April 2021.

Source: Syria TV
Language: Arabic
Date: 2 May 2022

711 Journalists Have Been Killed in Syria since 2011, Most by the Syrian Government

What does it say? The report describes the unsafe conditions journalists experience across Syria and the repercussions they face from various local authorities in the country. Hundreds working in media, including women and children, have been kidnapped, detained, tortured, or killed since 2011.

Reading between the lines:

The report also reveals that over 1,250 journalists in Syria have been detained since 2011, and that 84 percent are still in detention or disappeared. Recent laws introduced by the Government of Syria have perpetuated violations against freedom of expression (see: [Syria Update 3 May 2022](#)).

Source: Syrian Network for Human Rights
Language: Arabic
Date: 3 May 2022

Government Establishes New Chamber of Industry in Tartous

What does it say? The Tartous Chamber of Commerce and Industry will be split into two following a recent trend in other Syrian governorates.

Reading between the lines:

The news is notable for actors involved in early recovery programmes given that such bodies increasingly serve as gatekeepers to programming. This may present risks due to the backgrounds of the chamber's leadership.

Source: Syria Report
Language: English
Date: 3 May 2022

Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria

What does it say? The briefing from the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator highlighted that over 25 percent of funding for the next year will contribute to early recovery or resilience, and that additional cross-line aid delivery convoys to northwest Syria are also planned.

Reading between the lines:

Early recovery efforts are needed to improve living conditions throughout Syria. Cross-line aid delivery to the northwest must be dramatically increased should the cross-border authorisation not be renewed in July.

Source: OCHA
Language: English
Date: 26 April 2022

The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). WPCS will provide operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a mid-conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers who will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

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