

# Syria Update

## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

### Dar'a Killings Highlight Unseen Local Toll of Syria's Drug Trade

#### WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW

##### Turkey Continues to Threaten Invasion of Northeast Syria

The prospect of a new Turkish offensive against northeast Syria still looms, but whether it will actually happen is anyone's guess. Pg 6

##### Eighth Round of Constitutional Talks in Geneva Conclude with Little Progress

The talks, predictably, made little headway. Pg 6

##### Chief Suspect in Tadamon Massacre Detained

The officer's disappearance is likely an attempt to prevent further revelations and condemnation. Pg 7

##### EU Sanctions Syrian al-Qaeda Affiliate Hurras al-Din

The belated sanctions target a group that, for all intents and purposes, no longer exists. Pg 8

##### Rukban Water Supplies Coming from Jordan Reduced by Half

Local narratives differ as to whether the water was deliberately cut by UNICEF, or whether it is a temporary reduction due to maintenance. Pg 8

While international attention has focused on the export of Captagon to neighbouring states, Syria's south is seeing increased localised violence tied to the uptick in the drug trade. Image courtesy of Al Arabiya.



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.

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هذه ترجمة عربية لتقريرنا الذي يبحث في الحالات الإقليمية المشابهة لمجتمع الميم السوري من أجل تحديد فرص ودروس يمكن الاستفادة منها لدعم هذا المجتمع.

**مجتمع الميم في سوريا: دراسات في برامج الدعم الإقليمية**

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

On 31 May, local and media sources in southern Syria reported the killing of five individuals and an additional attempted assassination in Dar'a Governorate over a two-day period. While violence has plagued the region since its recapture by Government forces in 2018, such violence is evolving as it becomes increasingly tied to the uptick in the drug trade, which is likely to overlap with related illicit activities that have a long track record in Syria: extortion, kidnapping-for-ransom, human trafficking, mercenarism, and arms trafficking. Syria's drug trade will not go anywhere soon, and while coverage to date has focused on the impacts that will be felt in destination markets far afield, its cost in blood is likely to be borne most heavily by Syrians in Syria, especially in the south. International political, security, aid, and stabilisation actors working in the region would do well to adapt their planning to this worrying trend in the aim of limiting the human cost.

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

- 01 On 1 June, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Turkey would soon launch an attack on Menbij and Tall Refaat, continuing the latest round of threats since the possibility of an operation was first announced on 23 May. While it is not yet clear whether another invasion will occur, analysts are advised to pay attention to military movements rather than political signals, and aid actors should plan for all possibilities.
- 02 The eighth round of Syrian Constitutional Committee talks were held in Geneva this past week and were predictably inconclusive. In the context of irreconcilable interests of the Syrian, regional, and global parties involved, marginal wins are likely the best that can be hoped for, and the emphasis should be on finding tactical-level areas of agreement where concord can lessen the suffering of Syrians.
- 03 On 30 May, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported that the Syrian Government had arrested officer Amjad Yusuf, who took part in the Tadamon massacre in 2013, in an effort to limit further exposure and investigation efforts. For actors hoping to gain some measure of Government of Syria acquiescence to accountability efforts, Yusuf's disappearance is an ominous signal of the barriers to formal accountability.
- 04 On 30 May, the EU sanctioned Hurras al-Din (HAD), the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, its leader Faruq al-Suri, and its religious leader, Sami al-Aridi. The belated sanctioning of HAD and its leaders — long past their relevance to the conflict, or any serious operational threat abroad — raises questions about the timeliness and efficacy of the EU sanctions mechanism, and of the international coordination of Western sanctions.
- 05 On 26 May, residents of Rukban camp in southern Syria accused UNICEF of reducing the amount of water supplied to the camp from Jordan to half its usual amount. Competing narratives over the source and duration of the camp's water issues highlight the need for clearer and stronger public messaging on the part of aid actors in Syria as disinformation, misinformation, and rumour spread.

02

GENEVA

**Eighth Round of Constitutional Talks in Geneva Conclude with Little Progress**

04

BRUSSELS

**EU Sanctions Syrian al-Qaeda Affiliate Hurras al-Din**

01

TURKEY, NORTHEAST SYRIA

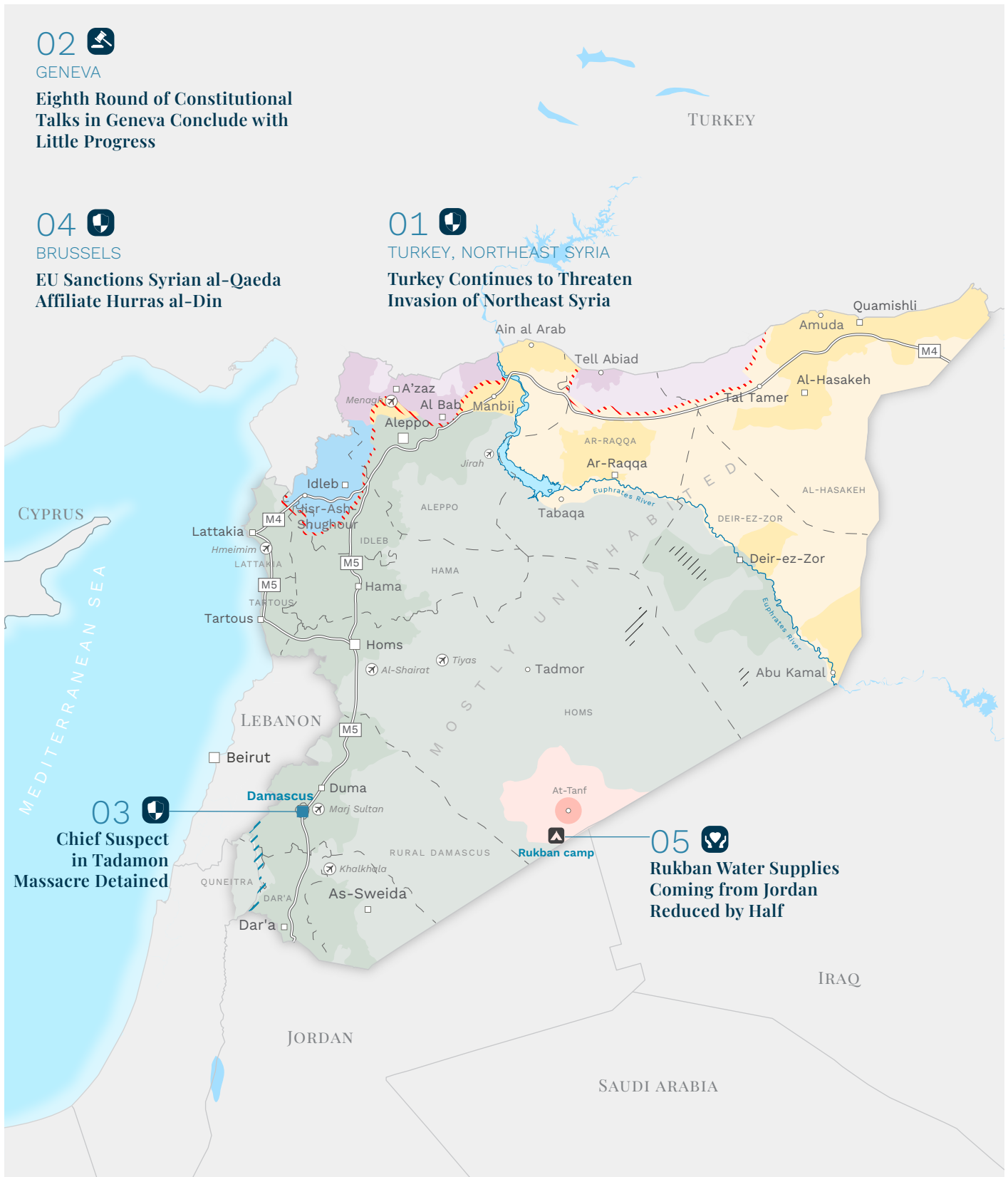
**Turkey Continues to Threaten Invasion of Northeast Syria**

05

**Rukban Water Supplies Coming from Jordan Reduced by Half**

03

**Chief Suspect in Tadamon Massacre Detained**



**Population Density**

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

100 km

**Territorial Control**

LOW POPULATION DENSITY

- Government of Syria
- Syrian Democratic Forces
- Syrian National Army
- US-Backed Opposition Groups
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
- Islamic State presence
- Contested area
- UN Disengagement Observer Force

**Type Of Incident**

- Humanitarian Issues
- Social
- Regional Intervention
- Security
- Economy
- Governance

## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

**O**n 31 May, local and media sources in southern Syria [reported](#) five killings and an attempted assassination in Dar'a Governorate over a two-day period. As [documented by local media](#), at least 57 people of various political affiliations were killed in southern Syria in May. While violence has plagued the region since its recapture by Government forces in July 2018 ([Security Archipelago: Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate](#)), such violence is evolving as it becomes increasingly tied to the drug trade — a trend that should alarm policy makers and humanitarian implementers whose explicit aim and approach are tied to efforts to restore stability to the region.

### Silver and lead

Analysis and media coverage of the Syrian drug trade have predominantly focused on the role of the Assad regime and the scale of export to markets in the Gulf. In this context, the increase in drug-related bloodshed in southern Syria is evidence of the ways in which drug trafficking and drugs sales are emerging as little-recognised drivers of conflict and instability, albeit on a local scale, within Syria itself (see: [Syria Update 1-7 August 2019](#)). Donor governments and aid and stabilisation actors working in Syria should find such incidents troubling; there is a distinct risk that as more Syrians are exposed to drug economies (see: [The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State](#)), petty competition, score-settling, and inter-personal conflict over the narcotics trade will fuel deadly violence, driving local unrest in a new phase of conflict, even as large-scale violence abates. Attention is needed from aid actors and policy makers to manage the challenge, which is likely to become worse before it can begin to get better.

### Southern Syria: A centre of drugs production, trade, and violence

The southern Syria region has become synonymous with captagon production, cross-border shipments (primarily from southern Lebanon into southern Syria and from southern Syria into Jordan), and local drug retail. Violence is a risk at every stage, and from a variety of involved actors — from high-level Assad regime-linked organisations and individuals to reconciled opposition actors and local smuggling networks. This violence, and the drug trade more broadly, is deeply entangled with other criminal enterprises, previous conflicts, political rivalries, and personal vendettas between individuals and groups active in the region.

When analysing dynamics in this context, it is thus often difficult to discern the direct role of the drug trade from adjacent drivers of instability. What can be said with certainty is that all of this makes for a complex security context that is ripe for violence at every point in the drug supply chain.

The victims of the recent killings and attempted killings in Dar'a and at the border illustrate this complexity. They include Abdullah Aqleh Abu al-Hayal, a lawyer mediating between detainees' families and security agencies. While local sources do not believe al-Hayal to have been directly tied to the drug trade, his killing is thought to be linked to his failure to make payments the leader of a local Military Intelligence-affiliated armed group, Imad Abu Zureik, who is heavily involved in drug production in Dar'a and drug shipments to Jordan. By contrast, Ahmad Imad al-Issa, a leader within a Dar'a armed group reportedly working for the Air Force Intelligence Directorate and who survived a recent assassination attempt, is reputed to be deeply involved in drug shipments, and has allegedly been working with Abu Ali al-Laham, a major overseer of drug trafficking routes in eastern Dar'a in coordination with Military and Air Force Intelligence. Another recent casualty, Ahmed Mamoun Abu Jaysh, who was [assassinated](#) in Dar'a on 28 May by unknown parties, was believed to have been involved in local drug retail, while a smuggler was [killed by Jordanian Armed Forces](#) on 2 June while attempting to transport drugs across the border.

While information about the violence is scarce, one thing that stands out is its localised nature. Although drug-related killings on the Syria-Jordan border are well-noted, similar deaths inside Syria have attracted precious little consideration, given the predominant focus by analysts on the role of the Assad regime and the Syrian Government. Yet, it would be a mistake to understand these issues as a centralised endeavour led by the Syrian regime alone. Rather, on the functional level the drugs trade is decentralised and distributed, with networks of involved actors of various roles and sizes — from nominally state-affiliated institutions like the Fourth Division, Military Intelligence, and Air Force Intelligence, to Iran-linked militias like Hezbollah, to local entrepreneurs, former opposition networks, and Bedouin tribal smugglers. Each actor exercises a degree of autonomy and initiative, and alternately competes and cooperates with one another and the regime itself. While the Assad regime undoubtedly sits at its centre drawing in rents from its proceeds, the Syrian

drug industry — and indeed the Syrian ‘system’ as a whole — is best understood as a network of actors with overlapping sovereignties, operating more like a corporate franchise in a highly competitive, profit-driven ecosystem.

### An evolving challenge for Syria and the region

The drug trade in Syria has become the most prominent and arguably the most profitable illicit economic activity in the Syrian conflict. Events like the recent killings in Dar’a demonstrate how it has also become a driver of conflict and instability. The longer the chaos in Syria drags on, the more actors will be pressured to participate in the drug trade, and a rise in localised violence can be expected (see: [Syria Update 7 February 2022](#)). Regrettably, an uptick in the drug trade is likely to overlap with related illicit activities that have a long track record in Syria: extortion, kidnapping-for-ransom, human trafficking, mercenarism, and arms trafficking. These risks and the spread of violence and instability are unlikely to be contained entirely within Syria’s borders. For the foreseeable future, the Syrian state is unlikely to make serious efforts to suppress narco-trafficking. Communities threatened by drug and other criminal violence will likely look to their own defence, with local Druze militias in As-Sweida already engaging in violence against traffickers and suspected traffickers in much the same way as did the autodefensas that emerged in Mexico in the last decade. Syria’s drug trade will not go anywhere soon, and while coverage to date has focused on the impacts that will be felt in destination markets far afield, its cost in blood is likely to be borne most heavily by Syrians in Syria, especially in the south. International political, security, aid, and stabilisation actors working in the region would do well to adapt their planning to this worrying trend in the aim of limiting the human cost.

**Q** *On the functional level the drugs trade is decentralised and distributed, with networks of involved actors of various roles and sizes*

## WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



## 01 TURKEY, NORTHEAST SYRIA

## Turkey Continues to Threaten Invasion of Northeast Syria

On 1 June, Turkish President Recep Erdogan announced that Tall Refaat and Menbij will be the first targets of a planned Turkish military operation into northern Syria. According to Erdogan, the planned operation is intended to rid the two cities of “terrorists,” and will later expand to “other regions, step-by-step.” The territories in question are currently held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). The Turkish government considers the YPG terrorists due to alleged affiliations with the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) insurgent group. Erdogan initially announced plans for an operation on 23 May, declaring his intention to create a 30-kilometre-deep “safe zone” in northern Syria along the Turkish border (see: [Syria Update 30 May 2022](#)). Erdogan’s announcement followed unconfirmed reports that Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) units and affiliated Syrian opposition groups have begun to amass in the A’zaz area in possible preparation for an offensive. During a visit to southern Turkey on 2 June, the US ambassador to the UN reiterated US opposition to the attack. Meanwhile, a US military redeployment was reported east of the Euphrates River; critically, there is no known US military presence in Menbij or Tall Refaat.

### Conditions ripening

Whether Turkey will actually launch such an offensive remains to be seen, although its selection of target areas that are absent an active US troop presence edges the likelihood somewhat higher. If verified, Turkish military movements and evolving geopolitical dynamics may also make an offensive more likely than in the recent past. Similar threats in October 2021 failed to materialise after Turkey proved unable to get the green light from Russia and the US, the latter of which withdrew forces to make way for Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. Despite the importance of concurrent pressure tactics over the Kurdish question by Turkey vis-à-vis NATO, given the realities of troop positions, the US objection may matter less than the outcome of Turkish-Russian negotiations, due to Russia’s direct military presence in both Tall Refaat and

Menbij. The Turkish and Russian presidents reportedly discussed the planned offensive on 31 May, and are slated to discuss it further as part of the Sochi talks.

While both Turkey and Russia are likely to use the events to win political concessions, aid actors focused on Syria should heed the lessons of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine: significant military build-ups and large-scale troop movements are costly as political theatre, but important signifiers of a genuine willingness to launch a full-scale military offensive. In terms of the humanitarian impact of any such offensive, Tall Refaat is sparsely populated, presently unlikely to be targeted for significant humanitarian assistance, and strategically useful primarily as a staging ground for attacks by Kurdish partisans on northern Aleppo. The case of Menbij is different. It is a diverse, largely Arab community that has nearly returned to Government of Syria control on several occasions. An offensive targeting Menbij would wreak havoc in a bustling transit hub that is still recovering from Islamic State rule, and disrupting traffic on the cross-region M4 would interrupt commercial activity and transit across northeast Syria. Aid actors’ contingency planning for an offensive should take this into account.



## 02 GENEVA

## Eighth Round of Constitutional Talks in Geneva Conclude with Little Progress

The eighth round of the Syrian Constitutional Committee meetings, chaired by the United Nations Special Representative for Syria, Geir Pedersen, kicked off on Monday 30 May in Geneva, Switzerland, and concluded Friday 3 June having made little headway. The talks were attended by members of the “Small Body” responsible for writing the constitution, including 15 representatives each from the Government of Syria, the opposition, and civil society. The discussions focused on four principles (agreed upon by the Government- and opposition-aligned co-chairs): unilateral coercive measures (sanctions), maintaining

and strengthening state institutions, ensuring the supremacy of the constitution and the position of international treaties, and implementing transitional justice. One day of discussion was allotted per principle. This and the seven previous UN-led constitutional negotiations achieved no significant progress largely due to the lack of viable political backing to the process. The ninth round of talks is scheduled for 25–29 July.

### Move the needle, not the boulder

The failure of this latest round of talks — which have been ongoing since 2019 and are the latest iteration of multiple phases of negotiations since the start of the Syrian conflict — was disappointing but likely unsurprising to most observers. There has rarely been a viable zone of possible agreement between the parties to the conflict, and for the Government of Syria, a military solution has always been preferable. Shortly before their launch in October 2019, President Bashar al-Assad [described](#) the Government of Syria delegation to the constitutional meetings as “backed by the government... but the Government itself is not part of these negotiations,” essentially undermining the reliability of such engagement. While negotiations are unlikely to produce a solution to the conflict itself, they remain a relatively low-cost line of effort that may yield occasional marginal wins. Nevertheless, it is not clear how such meetings could resolve the irreconcilable interests of the Syrian, regional, and global parties involved, and address issues of political fragmentation, durable instability, violence, economic crisis, and widespread humanitarian need, complicated by major access challenges. In that context, marginal wins are likely the best that can be hoped for, and the emphasis should be on finding tactical-level areas of agreement where concord can lessen the suffering of Syrians.

“Given the realities of troop positions, the US objection may matter less than the outcome of Turkish-Russian negotiations, due to Russia’s direct military presence in both Tall Refaat and Menbij



## 03 DAMASCUS, SYRIA

### Chief Suspect in Tadamon Massacre Detained

On 30 May, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) [reported](#) that the Government of Syria had detained Amjad Yusuf, a Military Intelligence officer who headed Branch 227, which is associated with the killing and rape of dozens of people in Tadamon in 2013 (see: [Syria Update 9 May 2022](#)). Yusuf — and the violence in Tadamon — came to the forefront of the news in the last month owing to new public reporting on the massacre, including newly-released video footage of many of the killings. In a rarity for Syria, Yusuf confessed to carrying out dozens of killings as part of [an investigation](#) by a pair of genocide researchers. To date, the Government of Syria has not released information regarding Yusuf’s disappearance, nor has it referred him to the judiciary. The Syrian state has not commented publicly on the Tadamon killings, although a general amnesty for terrorism crimes was promulgated only days after the reportage began to attract global attention (see: [Syria Update 9 May 2022](#)).

#### The consequences of confessing

It is likely, as SNHR and others have [surmised](#), that Yusuf has been forced underground or detained by the Government of Syria itself in a bid to prevent further confessions or disclosures. In so doing, it neutralises an actor whose statements implicate the Syrian security services and challenge the legitimacy of the Government of Syria. More broadly, the case of Yusuf and Tadamon highlights the challenges facing legal, social, and intercommunal accountability and reconciliation in Syria, especially to the important first steps of disclosure and remembrance. Despite the wealth of reporting and audio-visual data documenting the conflict in Syria, gaps in evidence remain, often due to the intransigence of authorities. For instance, the Government of Syria has not [disclosed](#) the identity of the victims of Tadamon, has not informed their families of their passing, and neither has it done so for countless other incidents throughout the war. For actors hoping to gain some measure of Government of Syria acquiescence to even the meanest accountability efforts, Yusuf’s disappearance is an ominous signal of the barriers to formal accountability.



## 04 BRUSSELS

## EU Sanctions Syrian al-Qaeda Affiliate Hurras al-Din

On 30 May, the European Union enacted sanctions against Hurras al-Din (HAD), the once-feared al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Measures also specifically targeted its leader, Faruq al-Suri, and its religious leader, Sami al-Aridi. According to the EU, HAD has been involved in the planning of external terrorist operations by establishing operational camps in Syria that provide terrorist training to its members. In 2019, the US State Department designated HAD a Foreign Terrorist Organisation and placed “Rewards for Justice” bounties on three of its leaders, including al-Suri and al-Aridi.

### Slow on the Draw

Analysts have puzzled over the timing of the sanctions, given that HAD’s relevance to the conflict in Syria and any threat it may once have posed have long since faded. HAD was formed in 2018 by former Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) senior members with ties to al-Qaeda, but in recent years has been degraded by HTS crack-downs, US-led International Coalition airstrikes, and attrition such that it is now severely debilitated and poses little threat to Syria, let alone to Europe. Since 2020, HAD has managed to carry out only two attacks: one targeting Russian forces in Ar-Raqqa Governorate in late 2020 (see: [Syria Update 11 January 2021](#)) and another against the Syrian Government security apparatus in Damascus in August 2021 (see: [Syria Update 9 August 2021](#)). Given the irreconcilability of the targeted actors, sanctions in this case are a security measure rather than a means of political coercion. Nonetheless, sanctions are the primary policy lever wielded by the West to shape the behaviour of actors in Syria — including the Government of Syria. The belated action in the case of HAD prompts questions over the agility of sanctions-related measures, and it highlights the fact that if Western actors wish to get serious about achieving leverage through sanctions, including their use in ‘step for step’ and ‘more for more’ approaches, they will need to make dramatic improvements to multilateral coordination and responsiveness to contextual realities.



## 05 RUKBAN CAMP

## Rukban Water Supplies Coming from Jordan Reduced by Half

On 26 May, the official Facebook page of Rukban camp in southern Syria accused the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) of reducing the amount of water supplied to the camp from Jordan to half its usual amount amid an ongoing siege imposed by the Syrian Government (see: [Syria Update 4 April 2022](#)). That narrative has not gone undisputed, however, as activists in the camp attributed the decrease in water to maintenance work on the pumping station in Jordan, noting that the reduction is likely temporary and that this is not the first time that the amount of water has been reduced. Nonetheless, many have continued to attribute water issues to wilful action by the UN. Syria TV cited sources claiming that the UN had reduced its funding to the water company responsible for transporting water from Jordan to the camp. On 30 May, The Syrian National Coalition called on the UN to immediately retract the decision to reduce the camp’s water supply, and to work effectively to ensure a decent life for thousands of families in the camp, who told the media that the reduction in the water supplies would be disastrous on their limited farming and livestock.

“Competing narratives over the source and duration of the camp’s water issues highlight the need for clearer and stronger public messaging on the part of aid actors in Syria.”

### A population in peril

Rumour and hearsay have thrived given competing narratives over the source and duration of the camp’s water issues, highlighting the need for clearer and stronger public messaging on the part of aid actors in Syria as disinformation, misinformation, and rumour spread, particularly concerning UN activities. The director of the local NGO “Better World,” which has been



responsible for water distribution and maintenance of water lines in cooperation with UNICEF since 2017, told the Rukban Network that water quantities are determined by UNICEF based on the needs of the population, and stated that his organisation is not responsible for the shortage. While some media sources suggest that UNICEF is attempting to cut off Rukban residents by slashing funding to the organisation in charge of transporting and distributing water, other outlets quoted activists and camp representatives who seemed to understand the matter as a temporary maintenance procedure. Stronger communications regarding the reasoning behind, and objectives of, UN activities may prevent misunderstandings and forestall criticism, as was seen with the recent UNDP factory rehabilitation project in Homs (see: [Syria Update 30 May 2022](#)). With humanitarian conditions at Rukban bleaker than ever, a long-term solution should be formulated, and donors, especially the US, should pressure Jordan to facilitate access to Rukban.

## OPEN SOURCE ANNEX

## Open Source Annex

The Open Source Annex highlights key media reports, research, and primary documents that are not examined in the Syria Update. For a continuously updated collection of such records, searchable by geography, theme, and conflict actor — and curated to meet the needs of decision-makers — please see COAR’s comprehensive online search platform [Alexandrina](#).

**Note:** These records are solely the responsibility of their creators. COAR does not necessarily endorse — or confirm — the viewpoints expressed by these sources.

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### The influence of Climate Change on Wheat Production: A review study on Northeast Syria (April 2022)

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**What does it say?** According to a recently released, USAID-funded iMMAP study, temperatures in northeast Syria are 0.8 degrees warmer on average than a century ago, wheat yields are at a five-year low, a substantial minority of farmers could not access irrigation, and yield losses due to temperature in the 2020-21 growing season reached 30 percent.

**Reading between the lines:** Climate change is one of many factors compounding challenges to human security in the Syrian context, especially as the war in Ukraine and a global economy reeling from COVID-19 add food-security and economic stress to a country and region already in crisis.

**Source:** ReliefWeb  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 31 May 2022

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### US sanctions exemptions in northern Syria draw new political-economic map

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**What does it say?** The US decision to exempt parts of northeastern and northwestern Syria from Caesar Sanctions may drive federalisation in Syria, and regional and international actors — and, of course, the Syrian Government — will develop strategies to adapt to the changing situation.

**Reading between the lines:** While the long-term impacts of the lifting of US sanctions remain to be seen, it is likely that it will allow the US to continue resistance to normalisation and rapprochement with the Government of Syria while also allowing the injection of much-needed capital into the Syrian economy in the north, albeit while underscoring the division with those in Government areas.

**Source:** Enab Baladi  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 31 May 2022

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### ‘Zero asylum seekers’: Denmark forces refugees to return to Syria

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**What does it say?** Denmark has been rejecting the residency renewals of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers following a 2019 decision that declared the Damascus region safe. Networks of Syrian activists in Denmark are resisting efforts to deport victims of this policy.

**Reading between the lines:** Backlash against refugees, especially those from the Islamic world, is likely to continue in European countries for the foreseeable future, and aid actors working in Syria are important voices for informing Western audiences that despite a decline in wartime violence, the country is by no means safe for refugee return, given its persistent overlapping crises.

**Source:** The Guardian  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 25 May 2022

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## War is still ongoing in Syria – please don't forget about us

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**What does it say?** Syrian aid worker Mohammed al-Alkhdar, with Islamic Relief, narrates his experiences throughout the Syrian civil war, describes the current dire conditions on the ground, and makes an impassioned plea for continued international humanitarian support to Syria.

**Reading between the lines:** The Syria crisis, in its twelfth year, has shifted from a context of brutal – but eye-catching – war, to one where deprivation drives need, while political solutions are as elusive as always. Al-Alkhdar is thus right to worry that attention – and aid budgets – are likely to decrease in light of more immediate challenges to world stability, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so aid sector actors should emphasise Syria's interconnectedness with and relevance to other such crises.

**Source:** [Metro UK](#)  
**Language:** [English](#)  
**Date:** [29 May 2022](#)

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## Syria's barrel bomb experts in Russia to help with potential Ukraine campaign

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**What does it say?** The report claims that a cadre of Syrian military technicians with experience constructing "barrel bombs" (air-dropped improvised explosive devices) has been sent by the Government of Syria to aid its Russian ally in its invasion of Ukraine; however, there are no confirmed reports that Syrians have actually participated in hostilities there.

### Reading between the lines:

The barrel bomb experts and other Syrian Government-affiliated troops that have gone to Russia, purportedly to support its aggression against Ukraine, are best understood as a political gesture of solidarity between autocratic allies rather than a source of real military capacity. In a high-intensity international armed conflict with contested airspace that, like a Western Front c. 1916 with drones, is fought by state militaries and largely defined by artillery duels and trench warfare, Syrian barrel bomb technicians and other troops are unlikely to make a difference — that is, if they are ever actually deployed.

**Source:** [The Guardian](#)  
**Language:** [English](#)  
**Date:** [22 May 2022](#)

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## Murders continue in Syria's al-Hol camp

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**What does it say?** The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported Monday 30 May that the body of an Iraqi refugee woman was found beheaded, shackled, and with marks of torture, in a valley between sections of the al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. The killing is the sixth murder at al-Hol in May.

### Reading between the lines:

There is no information available as to who committed the murder or why. What is clear is that, with IS presence, extraordinary levels of violence, and a population — mostly women and children — with high levels of vulnerability, al-Hol will continue to be a humanitarian crisis until some resolution is found.

**Source:** [Kurdistan24](#)  
**Language:** [English](#)  
**Date:** [30 May 2022](#)

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## 13 Albanians, others from Kosovo are repatriated from Syria

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**What does it say?** Four Albanian women and nine children, alongside others from Kosovo, who were linked to Islamic State (IS) foreign fighters and had been living in camps in northeast Syria since the fall of the caliphate, were repatriated to Albania on 28 May.

### Reading between the lines:

The repatriation of IS-linked foreigners to their home countries is a welcome step toward addressing the wicked problem of the camps. However, the majority of the camp population is Syrians and Iraqis, so regional solutions are essential to solving the issue.

**Source:** [Associated Press](#)  
**Language:** [English](#)  
**Date:** [28 May 2022](#)

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## Russian ship carries 30,000 tonnes of grain plundered from Ukraine to Syria, satellite images show

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**What does it say?** The Russian cargo ship Matros Poznych docked at Lattakia port on 27 May while carrying 30,000 tonnes of grain plundered from areas of Ukraine under Russian occupation, according to US firm Maxar Technologies.

### Reading between the lines:

As the article notes, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated regional and global food-supply and economic crises, especially in the Middle East.

**Source:** [Middle East Monitor](#)  
**Language:** [English](#)  
**Date:** [30 May 2022](#)

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## Diplomats Fear Russia May Use Syrian Aid as Bargaining Chip in Ukraine

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**What does it say?** With the deadline looming in July for UN decisions on renewal of the cross-border mechanism, the likelihood of Russia using its veto as leverage for concessions on sanctions and Ukraine is high – and the situation, which involves everything from the global food supply to refugee flows to the accession of new NATO members, is staggeringly complex.

**Reading between the lines:** Russia may indeed seek to leverage the cross-border mechanism for concessions on Ukraine and sanctions, but resistance is likely, given the criticality of Ukraine to Western security interests. Actors working in the Syria context must brace for the impact of the cross-border mechanism being eliminated at short notice, while little time will be available to debate a new resolution.

**Source:** [The New York Times](#)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 28 May 2022

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## Lebanon Eager to 'Sell' Nationalities to Wealthy Syrians, Iraqis

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**What does it say?** On 29 May, Asharq al-Awsat reported that Lebanese President Michel Aoun, whose term ends in five months, is planning to naturalise hundreds of people by decree, predominantly wealthy Syrians and Iraqis, before he leaves office.

### **Reading between the lines:**

As the piece points out, such naturalisations — decreed in exchange for exorbitant sums — are a regular action by Lebanese presidents leaving office. For the Syrians who would benefit, it would offer a way to work around sanctions, while the measure serves as both a fundraising method for the Lebanese government and a way to bring new blood into Lebanese elite patronage networks.

**Source:** [Asharq al-Awsat](#)  
**Language:** English  
**Date:** 29 May 2022

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## Opposition's security practices defamation in northern Syria

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**What does it say?** Security forces affiliated with the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army and HTS alike regularly publish photos and videos of “offenders” they have arrested on social media, violating due process and the presumption of innocence, and leading to shame and stigma for the accused regardless of guilt.

### **Reading between the lines:**

This practice highlights the weakness of rule of law and justice in northwest Syria. With an array of ill-disciplined local armed groups enforcing public order essentially at whim and no effective judiciary, the region's civilians must navigate constant uncertainty and shifting rules – a reality that is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

**Source:** [Enab Baladi](#)  
**Language:** English  
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