

Syria Update

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

UN Procurement Statistics for 2021 Show Systemic Inertia

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Government of Syria delegation refuses to participate until Russia's alleged difficulties with Swiss hosts are resolved. [Pg 6](#)

No Movement Following Trilateral 'Astana' Summit in Tehran

Despite 'substantive' talks, there appeared to be no real progress on any key issues for Syria. [Pg 6](#)

Update on Turkey's Potential Military Operation in Syria

Turkey's military operation "is still on Ankara's agenda" but seems less imminent after the Tehran meeting between Turkey, Iran, and Russia. [Pg 7](#)

Uptick in Violence against Dar'a Political Figures

Violence in Dar'a is likely to intensify amid security chaos. [Pg 7](#)

Australian Teenager Dies in Prison in Northeast Syria

The case highlights the enduring human cost of the failure of foreign states to repatriate their citizens. [Pg 8](#)

UN spending at the Damascus Four Seasons Hotel, owned by the sanctioned Samer Foz, has received criticism following publication of the 2021 UN Global Marketplace annual procurement report. Image courtesy of Fouad Takla.



WEEKLY SYRIA UPDATE DIGEST



Gender Research in the Syrian Aid Response: Shortcomings and Solutions

As aid agencies have widened the scope of their interventions in Syria, research concerning gender has proliferated. Identifying common shortcomings seen across research prepared by NGOs and INGOs to support gender-responsive aid work in Syria, this paper proposes solutions that can allow donors and partners to more effectively approach the gender research that informs aid work in Syria.

[READ MORE](#)



China in Syria: Aid and Trade Now, Influence and Industry Later?

China has adopted a new posture in Syria since late 2016, leaning ever more heavily on bilateral assistance delivered directly to the Government of Syria — an apparent bid to strengthen ties with Damascus. Using aid data, this paper evaluates China’s evolving strategic engagement with Syria and assesses humanitarian contributions as a signal of a broader evolution in the Chinese-Syrian relationship.

[READ MORE](#)

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

Last week, the UN Global Marketplace (UNGM) published its annual procurement report for 2021, covering UN contracts globally, including in Syria. As in the past, the data itself offers few surprises, if any. Inevitably, among the contracted suppliers are entities linked to prominent sanctioned actors, reviving the perennial discussion on the UN and its contracts with sanctioned and Assad regime-linked actors. The data invites discussion of the ways in which compliance practices across the board in Syria have failed to prevent high-risk entities and actors from benefiting from humanitarian assistance, not only via UN contract awards, but also through NGO and INGO spending. A heightened emphasis on development assistance would provide donor governments with greater control over the way money is spent in Syria, and it will be critical for donors and implementers alike to establish system-wide best practices.

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

- 01 On 16 July, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen issued a statement expressing his regret that the ninth session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee talks in Geneva, due to begin on 25 July, would not go ahead. The indefinite postponement of the next round of talks — previous rounds of which achieved little, if any, progress — are the clearest signal yet that the political track for resolution of the Syrian conflict is reaching a dead end.
- 02 On 19 July, the presidents of Iran, Russia, and Turkey met in Tehran for the seventh trilateral summit of the Astana peace process. Despite ‘substantive’ talks, there appeared to be no real progress on any key issues for Syria, with Ankara having failed to secure support for its potential military incursion into northern Syria.
- 03 Turkey’s military operation is still on Ankara’s agenda but seems less urgent after the summit between the presidents of Turkey, Iran, and Russia in Tehran. On the ground, Russia and the Syrian Government sent military reinforcements to northern Syria while the Turkish army targeted Iranian militias in eastern Afrin and Syrian forces in Tall Refaat.
- 04 Violence against figures of various political affiliations has increased in Dar’a in the last two weeks. The development speaks to the broader issue of insecurity in Dar’a, resulting largely from the Syrian Government’s continuous attempt to impose effective control and the increased presence of Islamic State (IS) cells in the region.
- 05 On 17 July, Human Rights Watch reported the death of an Australian teenager in a prison in northeast Syria. The death highlights the unaddressed issue of foreign fighters and their families detained in Syria, especially children.

01 

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND
Ninth Round of Syrian Constitutional Committee Meetings Postponed

02 

TEHRAN, IRAN
No Movement Following Trilateral 'Astana' Summit in Tehran

03 

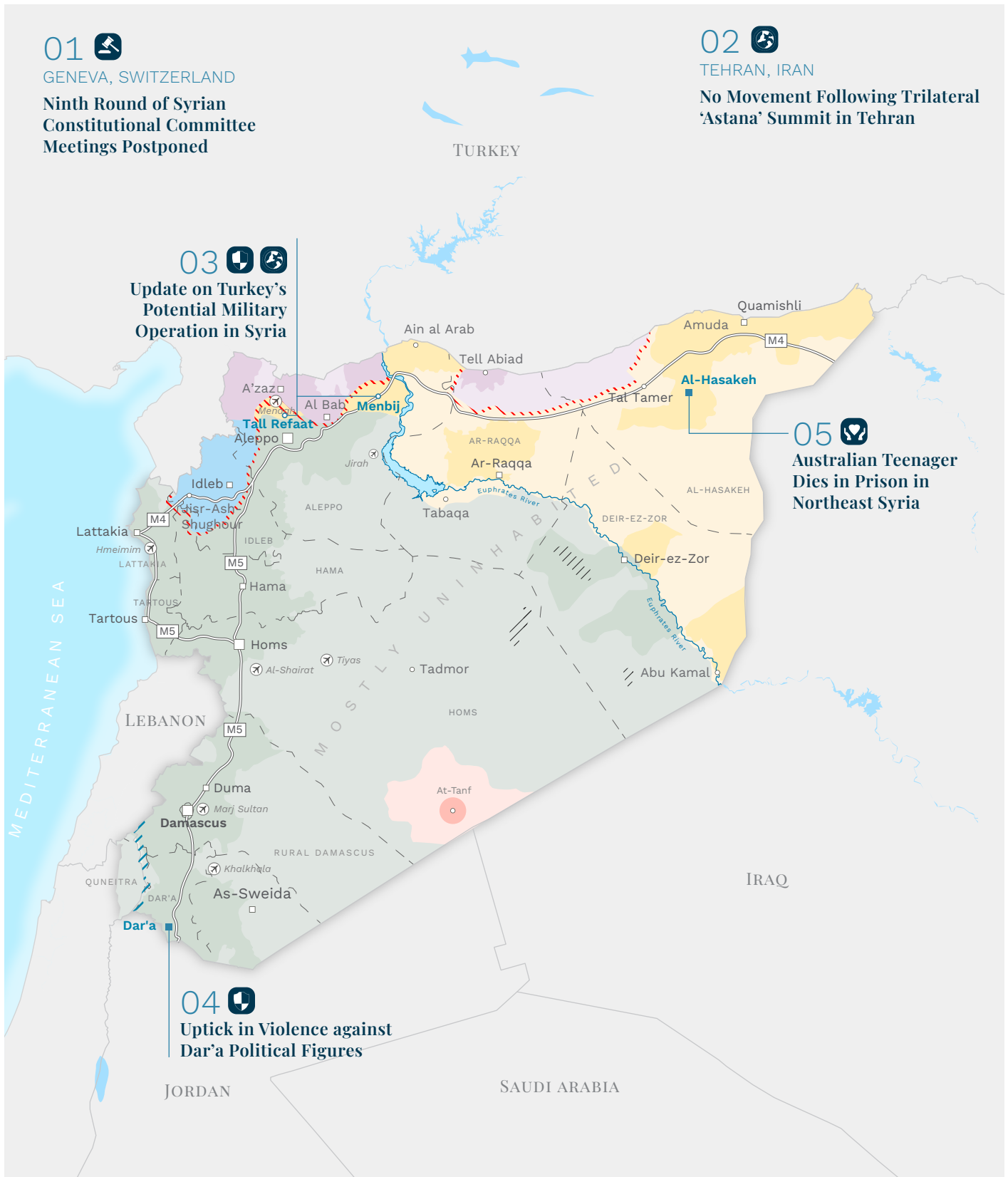
Update on Turkey's Potential Military Operation in Syria

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Australian Teenager Dies in Prison in Northeast Syria


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Uptick in Violence against Dar'a Political Figures









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

The UN Global Marketplace (UNGM) published last week its annual procurement report for 2021, covering UN contracts globally, including in Syria. The report records 199.75 million USD in goods and services procured inside Syria in 2021, a notable 20 percent decrease from the previous year. Among the listed UN suppliers are several with ties to individuals sanctioned over links to the Assad regime inner circle. These include businessperson Samer Foz, a stakeholder in the Damascus hotel where UN staff reside, and Nizar al-Asaad, the main shareholder of the Syrian Olive Oil Company – the single largest UN supplier in Syria, netting 20.7 million USD. Others, like security companies ProGuard for Safety and Security Services and Shorouk for Security Services, are also believed to have links to sanctioned individuals. Sanctioned entities appearing on the list include telecommunication giant Syriatel and the state-owned oil distributor, Mahrukut.

As in the past, the data itself offers few surprises. Yet, the report has revived perennial discussion on the UN and its relationship with sanctioned and Assad regime-linked actors. While critics have held up the report as evidence of the need for the UN to adapt, their critiques often reduce to the questions of due diligence practices related to sanctions compliance, an area in which the UN is unlikely to satisfy critics given its exemption from unilateral sanctions. A more productive approach is possible.

The data invites discussion of the ways in which compliance practices across the board in Syria have failed to prevent high-risk entities and actors from benefiting from humanitarian assistance, not only via UN contract awards, but also through NGO and INGO spending. The international sanctions placed on Syria are the world's most comprehensive, yet recent years have provided abundant evidence that sanctions alone are incapable of preventing malign actors from benefiting from aid funding. Like a game of cat-and-mouse, sanctions enforcement protocols have given rise to diversions and evasions, including networks of shell companies that mask the role of controversial figures. Rather than nar-

rowly addressing the failure of sanctions in this respect, there is a need to apply a broader lens to assess the downstream impacts of aid in Syria.

Fitting a quart into a pint pot

To paraphrase American humourist Charles Dudley Warner: Everybody talks about due diligence practices in Syria, but nobody seems to do anything about them. A new way of working is needed if aid actors are to reduce the advantages reaped by unintended beneficiaries. One area ripe for reform is transparency within contracting. The names of several dozen UN contractors for 2021 have been withheld from the UNGM report for vague security reasons. Paired with the ambiguities inherent to sub-granting, minimum disclosure practices like these render attempts to 'follow the money' in Syria all but impossible, despite donors' increasing demands for granular information concerning the way their money is spent in Syria.

While oft-proposed solutions such as heightened transparency in the reporting of UN agencies are needed, they will fall short in addressing systemic obstacles in the humanitarian system. Collectively, donors wield significant influence in the Syrian economy, whether as major buyers, sources of foreign currency, or the ultimate providers of essential services. Yet they have so far been unable to leverage that influence within a humanitarian framework to improve access and ensure inclusive, transparent, and conflict-sensitive contracting. A more impactful approach will therefore require adaptations on the part of donors, too.

Among other changes, embracing assistance that advances beyond an emergency humanitarian modality would provide donor governments with greater control over the way money is spent in Syria. While many in the aid world reflexively associate non-humanitarian funding streams (e.g., development funding) with a post-conflict setting, agencies operating on a non-humanitarian basis are already major players in the Syrian aid response. In fact, their presence generates new pressures to reconsider recent policy debate embodied by the New Way of Working (NWoW), the triple nexus,

“ While many in the aid world reflexively associate non-humanitarian funding streams (e.g., development funding) with a post-conflict setting, agencies operating on a non-humanitarian basis are already major players in the Syrian aid response.

and other associated concepts. Much of this debate is admittedly complex, but in one respect it is absolutely clear: All respective capacities within an aid response must enlarge their fields of vision. Questions arising from UN procurement in Syria merely reinforce the importance of this perspective. Indeed, they highlight that while politicisation and the integrity of humanitarian principles must remain core issues in Syria, longstanding tenets of humanitarianism can detract from the overarching effort to leverage aid for broader outcomes.

In this context, two emerging trends have focused attention on the means of reshaping the aid system to better meet underlying needs and achieve donor objectives. The first is the adoption of early recovery programming, now a bedrock of the aid response in Syria. The second is the discussion of [alternatives](#) to the cross-border mechanism in northwest Syria. Should an alternative come online, it may offer the opportunity to adopt due diligence and conflict-sensitivity standards that are fit-for-purpose. Throughout, it will be critical for donors and implementers alike to establish system-wide best practices. Already, efforts are underway to improve and promote conflict-sensitivity procedures as one means of ensuring value for money in aid work in Syria, yet these are isolated and uptake has been slow. Common definitions, methods, and practices will be needed if the system is to ensure that principles are applied consistently across geographies, sectors, and agencies.

WHOLE OF SYRIA REVIEW



01 GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

Ninth Round of Syrian Constitutional Committee Meetings Postponed

On 16 July, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen expressed his regret that the ninth session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee talks in Geneva, slated to begin on 25 July, would not go ahead following the Government of Syria's refusal to send its delegation until "requests from the Russian Federation were fulfilled." Russia's deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov stated on 19 July that "Russia is not comfortable going there [to Geneva] because the Swiss authorities have taken a not very friendly stance towards Russia and have lost their neutral status," amid Switzerland's support for EU sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

Smaller fish in a bigger geopolitical pond

The indefinite postponement of the next round of talks – previous rounds of which achieved little, if any, progress – are the clearest signal yet that the political track for resolution of the Syrian conflict is reaching a dead end. Despite Pedersen's call for "protecting and firewalling the Syrian political process from their differences elsewhere in the world," the newest impasse highlights how the Syrian conflict is becoming interwoven with Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see: [Crisis in Ukraine: Impacts for Syria](#)). Russia expressed dissatisfaction with Swiss authorities following the eighth round of Constitutional Committee talks (see: [Syria Update 6 June 2022](#)) and proposed moving the talks to a more "neutral" location, such as Damascus, Muscat or Abu Dhabi, during the 18th round of the 'Astana Talks' (see: [Syria Update 20 June 2022](#)). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to blame only the geopolitical fallout of the war in Ukraine for a lack of progress in Geneva, and a change of venue to the Gulf would likely create little impetus towards solutions. The talks have long been flawed, facing Government of Syria intransigence, failing to meaningfully represent key stakeholders such as authorities from northeast Syria, and lacking any

real leverage to force the Government to accept compromise. Looking ahead, seemingly the best hope will come from confidence-building measures between the Government of Syria and interlocutors at all levels, the so-called "step-for-step" approach, undoubtedly a slow and difficult process that will also have to contend with a changed geopolitical and strategic environment following Russia's war.



02 TEHRAN, IRAN

No Movement Following Trilateral 'Astana' Summit in Tehran

On 19 July, the presidents of Iran, Russia, and Turkey met in Tehran for the seventh trilateral summit of the Astana peace process. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated warnings that Ankara would launch an incursion into northern Syria (see: [Syria Update 20 June 2022](#)), yet was rebuffed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who said that "any sort of military attack in northern Syria will definitely harm Turkey, Syria, and the entire region, and will benefit terrorists." Russian President Vladimir Putin described the meeting as "really useful and very substantive" in a press statement, though the joint statement issued following the talks contained little of interest and no major divergence from that issued following the 18th round of 'Astana Talks' in Nur Sultan (see: [Syria Update 20 June 2022](#)).

Deafening silence

While undoubtedly high on the agenda, Turkey's planned incursion into northern Syria was notably absent from the statements issued after the summit. Ankara likely hoped to secure support for its operation, yet Tehran and Moscow appear to have held firm in their opposition – though Turkey has maintained it can launch the operation without support. Despite a lack of substantive developments from the meetings concerning Syria, the summit shows the importance of wider geopolitical interests between the three powers

beyond Syria. For example, the summit saw an opportunity for the Turkish president to [secure](#) Moscow's backing for the UN deal to [export](#) Ukrainian grain, critical for alleviating the global food insecurity and high prices which also threaten Syria's population (see: [Syria Update 18 July 2022](#)). Aid actors should recognise that major breakthroughs on the Syria file through the Astana process are unlikely in the short term, particularly as other international crises such as the war in Ukraine and its ramifications (see: [Crisis in Ukraine: Impacts for Syria](#)) draw political oxygen and divert attention.



03 MENBIJ AND TALL REFAAT, ALEPPO GOVERNORATE

Update on Turkey's Potential Military Operation in Syria

This is the fifth update on Turkey's potential military operation in northern Syria (see: [Syria Update 20 June 2022](#)). Turkey's military operation is still on Ankara's agenda but seems less imminent following the Tehran meeting between Turkey, Iran, and Russia. On the ground, Russia and the Syrian Government sent military reinforcements to northern Syria while the Turkish army targeted Iranian militias in eastern Afrin and Syrian forces in Tall Refaat.

- **Turkey softens its tone but continues to call on the US to leave Syria.** On 20 July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [stated](#) that Turkey's new military operation in Syria "remains on the agenda" until its concerns are addressed. This constitutes a departure from previous, more aggressive statements suggesting that Ankara will launch its operation in Syria "as soon as preparations on the Syrian border are completed" (see: [Syria Update 4 July 2022](#)). Erdogan may be signalling reluctance to wage the operation, at least without the approval of the Astana partners, which have so far maintained their opposition to such a move. Erdogan added that US forces "must leave Syria now," and accused its NATO ally of training and supporting "terrorists," referring to the People's Defence Units (YPG). Meanwhile, on 19 July, the Turkish army [targeted](#) Iranian militias in Afrin and Syrian forces in Tall Refaat.

- **The US continues to resist Turkey's operation.** On 18 July, the US army [carried](#) out a joint military patrol with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in rural Al-Hasakeh, signalling its continued support for the group. In recent weeks, Israel has reportedly lobbied the US to [press](#) Turkey to cancel its operation, warning of dire consequences for the Kurds and a boost to Iran's influence.
- **Kurdish parties seek international support.** On 17 July, 33 Kurdish parties in the Autonomous Administration [called](#) on the UN, the UN Security Council, and the US-led International Coalition to impose a no-fly zone over northern Syria.
- **The Syrian Government continues to bolster its positions in the north.** On 18 July, the Syrian Government [announced](#) it had sent heavy military reinforcements to northern Syria, mostly to Ein Issa in rural Ar-Raqqa and Ein Arab (Kobani) in Al-Hasakeh.
- **Russia's red light is still on.** On 19 July, a Russian military convoy [entered](#) SDF controlled areas in Manbij, one of the main targets of Turkey's operation, signalling Moscow's rejection of the planned incursion.



04 DAR'A

Uptick in Violence against Dar'a Political Figures

In recent weeks, violence against figures of various political affiliations has increased in Dar'a. On 22 July, Government of Syria forces [entered](#) the town of al-Yadouda, west of Dar'a, and clashed with former opposition leaders known for their affiliation to Islamic State (IS). Relatedly, on 16 July, local media [reported](#) that Government of Syria forces had threatened to enter Jasim to deal with IS cells in the city, while on 21 July, two Syrian army officers were [killed](#) by an IED planted in their car in eastern Dar'a. These incidents follow a series of assassinations in the south. Indeed, it was [reported](#) in May that 57 people of various political affiliations had

been killed in southern Syria since the turn of the year (see: [Syria Update 6 July 2022](#)).

Expect more instability

The recent violence speaks to the broader issue of insecurity in Dar'a, resulting largely from the Syrian Government's continued attempts to impose effective control and the increased presence of IS cells in the region. Since 2018, Russia-brokered reconciliation agreements with local communities (see: [Syria Update 1-7 August 2019](#)), which rely on both coercion and co-optation of notable figures, have largely succeeded in creating nominal influence over certain areas in Dar'a. Bringing about long-term stability has been more difficult, however. The increased presence of IS cells in southern Syria and their ability to disrupt regional stability represent a major challenge for local actors. In May, IS [claimed](#) several attacks, including the assassination of the head of a police station in eastern rural Dar'a. Drug trade-related violence also continues to fuel the chaotic state of security in the south, with killings and assassination attempts reportedly linked to drug trafficking (see: [Syria Update 4 June 2022](#)). In the long term, stability in the south is unlikely to be achieved as long as there are no sustainable agreements between the Government of Syria and former rebels. Without these, aid actors and implementers should expect continued violence and maintain dynamic security and contingency plans.



05 AL-HASAKEH

Australian Teenager Dies in Prison in Northeast Syria

On 17 July, [Human Rights Watch](#) reported the death of an Australian teenager, who was taken to Syria by relatives at the age of 11, in Ghwayran prison in northeast Syria. Yusuf Zahab had been imprisoned in the SDF-run prison in Al-Hasakah City since 2019, when he was captured alongside other family members and detained without charges by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during an offensive against IS. Zahab's extended family in Australia have [claimed](#) that, before leaving power in May, Australia's

previous government "knew about Yusuf's predicament for more than three years," adding, "We are unaware of any efforts to support, care for, or inquire about him." In response to the death of Zahab, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade issued a [statement](#) that says it is working to confirm Zahab's death, and that his family has been offered consular assistance. According to the department's spokesperson, the government remains "deeply concerned" about Australians in northeast Syria but cannot repatriate Australian citizens there due to security concerns.

Turning a blind eye

Zahab's death casts a spotlight on the problem of foreign citizens in northeast Syria, with almost [45,000 men, women, and children](#) from nearly 60 countries held as IS suspects or relatives in prisons and scattered across camps with largely unsafe and inhumane living conditions. The cause of Zahab's death is currently unknown, although he was [reportedly](#) injured in an IS attack on the prison in January (see: [Syria Update 31 January 2022](#)). At the time of the attack, IS was said to be using some of the over 700 and 850 young prisoners as human shields as the SDF sought to recapture the prison with US air support. [The SDF](#), as well as human rights organisations and advocates, have on numerous occasions urged the international community to address the issue of foreign fighters and their families. Repatriation, however, has been an excruciatingly slow process. Outside of central Asia, few [countries](#) have [repatriated](#) their citizens or taken action to stop their mistreatment. In the meantime, the SDF remains overburdened with the toll of hosting these individuals (see: [Syria Update 12 October 2020](#)). The SDF's haphazard camp and prison system is not a long-term solution to this problem. These sites remain a target for IS activities, while continued detention breeds resentment and radicalisation (see: [Countering Violent Extremism and Deradicalisation in Northeast Syria](#)). From repatriation to support for judicial processing and release mechanisms, there are a number of steps that the international community can take to ease the burden on local stakeholders, protect human rights, and ultimately serve counter radicalisation priorities.

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.

Sudanese TV presenter suggests Syrian refugees should leave Lebanon

What does it say? On 15 July, Dalia Ahmad, the host of the talk show “Fashet Khalq” on Lebanon’s Al-Jadeed network, suggested on the show that Lebanon could no longer bear the burden of hosting Syrian refugees, and they should be sent back to “their country.”

Reading between the lines:

Ahmad has previously been critical of the Lebanese government but is now echoing its rhetoric; the statements on her show are perhaps an indicator of Lebanese public sentiment, which — as in Turkey — is hostile to Syrian refugees and may drive increased deportations, for which aid sector actors working in Syria will have to account as they plan for the future.

Source: Arab News
Language: English
Date: 18 July 2022

The West Must Define its Priorities in Syria

What does it say? In the wake of the mere six-month extension of the cross-border mechanism, the West must work with Turkey to develop solutions for northwest Syria without the UN, such as building the capacity of aid actors to manage logistics, finding ways to conduct the necessary coordination with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the Salvation Government, and taking measures to protect aid convoys.

Reading between the lines: The analysis and recommendations presented are sound, but it remains to be seen to what degree Western governments and international organisations will proactively endeavour to find solutions, so aid sector actors must prepare for multiple scenarios come December.

Source: Asharq al-Awsat
Language: English
Date: 20 July 2022

Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria

What does it say? IS has proved resilient since its 2019 loss of territorial control, waging an insurgency that moves men, money, and material across lines of control, particularly between Autonomous Administration-held northeast Syria and Government of Syria-held central Syria; further conflict between actors in Syria could allow IS to take advantage of the resulting chaos.

Reading between the lines:

While a resurgence in territorial control is unlikely in the foreseeable future, IS is likely to remain a security threat and conflict economy actor compounding harms for civilians in Syria for the foreseeable future.

Source: International Crisis Group
Language: English
Date: 18 July 2022

Syrians Restricted by “Sponsorship” and “Immigrant Card” from Entering their Cities and Villages

What does it say? Syrians wishing to visit or reside in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration must navigate a complex bureaucracy to do so, including obtaining a visiting card requiring sponsorship by a current resident of those areas.

Reading between the lines: While the system is justified by the Autonomous Administration on security grounds, it is discriminatory against Arabs, with negative impacts on freedom of movement.

Source: Enab Baladi
Language: Arabic
Date: 20 July 2022

On the Principle of Reciprocity, the Syrian Regime Cuts its Relations with Ukraine

What does it say? The Syrian Government has severed diplomatic relations with Ukraine, after Ukraine did the same following Syrian recognition of the Russian-created breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Reading between the lines: While it is notable that Ukraine and Syria have retained diplomatic relations this late into Russia’s invasion, this development will likely have little direct impact on aid sector actors.

Source: Enab Baladi
Language: Arabic
Date: 20 July 2022

EU lifts sanctions on Syrian airline Cham Wings

What does it say? Having blacklisted the airline in December for its role in ferrying migrants to Belarus, the EU confirmed it has delisted Cham Wings as of 20 July.

Reading between the lines: The delisting of the airline, which is still sanctioned by the US for its role in supporting the Government of Syria throughout the conflict, will likely have little impact for aid-sector actors.

Source: Reuters
Language: English
Date: 20 July 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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