

Syria Update

Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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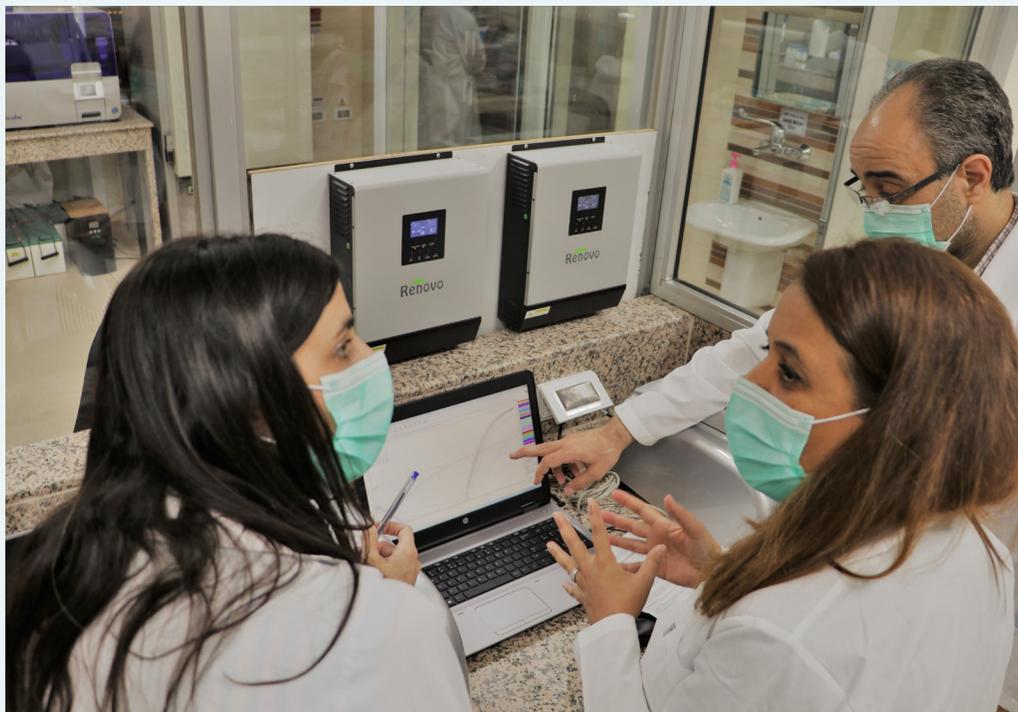


Image: WHO EMRO handout.

> 0 n 11 February, the World Health Organisation (WHO)

announced details of the three-phase COVID-19 vaccination plan in Syria. The Government of Syria's entry to the COVAX programme administered by the WHO marks the first and by far most important milestone to date in large-scale vaccination in Syria. However, major impediments will complicate equitable distribution, while important questions surrounding the complexities of how the vaccine programme will be carried out in Syria have yet to be answered.

The vaccination programme is to be carried out in Syria by targeting priority populations in three phases:

- Phase One: Healthcare workers and adults over 55 years old, an estimated 675,000 people (approx. 3 percent of the population).
- Phase Two: People with comorbidities, teachers, remaining older adults, and other essential workers, amounting to around 3.8 million people (an estimated 18 percent of the population)
- Phase Three: To be determined.

According to the **Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation** (GAVI), an estimated 1.02 million vaccine doses will be allocated to Syria in Phase One, to be delivered by the end of the first quarter or during the second quarter of 2021, pending availability. Syria's rollout plan specifies that priority groups will be reached in both Government of Syria-controlled areas and in Syria's northeast — the latter of which has been a priority concern among the aid and development community. Crucially, the WHO will also support

Syria's Vaccination Plan

Phase	Groups	Estimated number of people vaccinated* to be adjusted as per available vaccine allocation
Phase One	All health workers	190,000
	Older group (55 years or more)	485,450
Phase Two	Remainder of the older group	1,540,900
	Persons with comorbidities	1,125,750
	School teachers	302,827
	Other essential workers	858,073
Phase Three		To be determined

Source: WHO EMRO

vaccine transportation throughout Syria and will reportedly oversee an automated pre-registration platform to identify target groups.

The end of the beginning

Although the detailed initiative answers some long-standing questions about vaccination in Syria, reservations over timing, prioritisation, coverage, equitable distribution, and monitoring abound. Providing the vaccine to the most at-risk populations and health care workers, who have faced mounting infections and deaths, will be a boon to aid and development interventions that have sought to prop up healthcare capacity. However, doing so does not show a light at the end of the tunnel for the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Supply represents a major obstacle to the smooth rollout of the National Vaccine Deployment Plan. Syria cannot begin making substantive headway on Phase Two until new sources of vaccines materialise. Given the remote prospects for agreements between the Government of Syria

and pharmaceutical companies to procure the vaccine on a commercial basis, wide-scale vaccination is improbable for the foreseeable future.

Even populations who are nominally eligible for the first phase of vaccine rollout will struggle to receive their shots as a result of more deeply embedded concerns that are brought to the surface by bringing a conflict-sensitivity lense to the issue. For instance, the WHO specifies that 76 hospitals and 101 primary healthcare facilities will be offering vaccinations in Government-controlled areas, alongside 22 hospitals and 108 mobile teams in the northeast. On paper, this is a promising start that allays concerns over access and distribution to areas under control of the Kurdish-led polity in the northeast. However, the mechanism for registration, specific local allocations, mobility and access conditions, and the potential security ramifications for registration are all concerns that remain to be addressed. Perhaps most notable is the concern that

many Syrians, especially those with previous affiliation to opposition civilian or military entities, may forego participation in a system that collects personal data. The same is true of individuals wanted for conscription, or on other charges.

What about the northeast, the northwest, and the rest?

Although the vaccine rollout will reportedly include the northeast, past experiences have exposed the WHO to criticism that it is incapable of resisting host government pressures. For instance, following the closure of the Syria-Iraq Ya'robiyah crossing in January 2020, UN offices claimed they would work to cover any supply shortfalls in health and medical supplies as northeast Syria become reliant upon Damascus for such aid. Such pledges have arguably not been fully realised. That said, there is some hope that the COVID-19 crisis will bring supply and logistics back to the table as a major issue of international contention. Even if powerful stakeholders do manage to force the issue, cross-line vaccination will require the good-faith cooperation of a host of local authorities, security actors, aid entities, and health officials. These will no doubt be complex, difficult operations, with their implementation complicated further by further logistical realities (see: [Syria update 16 November 2020](#)).

In the northwest, the WHO in Syria is reportedly **coordinating** with WHO Turkey in Gaziantep and the **Syrian Immunization Team**, an alliance of health organisations operating in the region. They jointly submitted a COVAX application in the beginning of February. As of writing, the region has yet to obtain

approval for vaccine procurement but, if it does, vaccines are likely to be distributed through a more direct cross-border operation from Gaziantep. Potential COVAX vaccine procurement is envisaged to cover approximately 20 percent of the population residing in the northwest, including healthcare workers (approx. 3 percent).

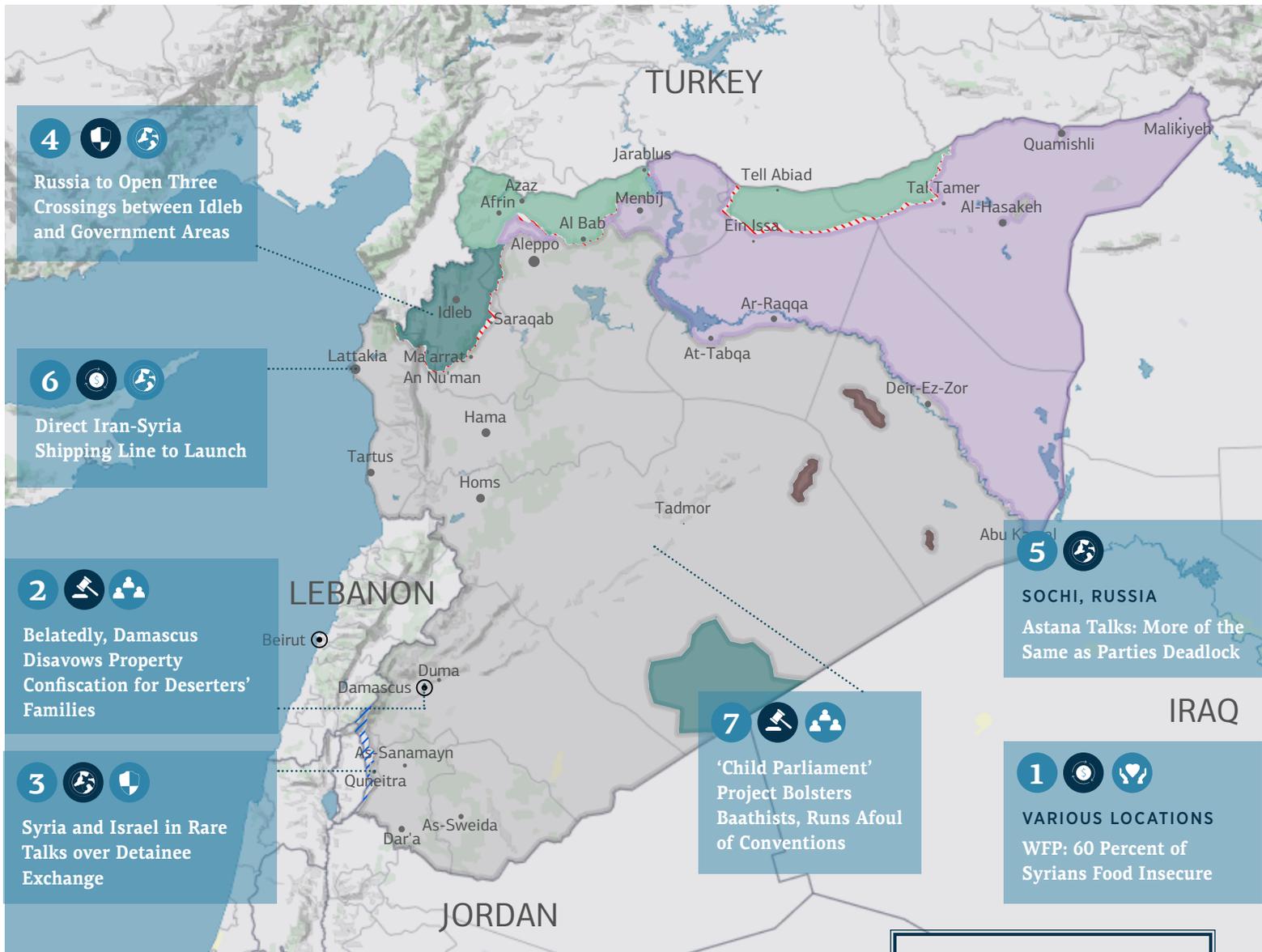
Syrian refugees labour under vaccination conditions which are even more variable (see: [Syria Update 25 January 2021](#)). To date, Jordan has carried out the most inclusive vaccination campaign, while Turkey appears set to account for Syrian refugees residing on its soil. Lebanon, battered by simultaneous political and economic crises, has made the fewest strides toward inclusive vaccination.

Better late than never?

Strapped for cash, Syria is unlikely to receive vaccines except through international largesse, raising the odds for the politicisation and instrumentalisation of such support. The most glaring such example is evidenced by reports that **Israel has agreed to fund** Syria's procurement of an unknown number of Russian-made vaccines as part of a murky prisoner exchange (for details on the swap, see below). Meanwhile, on 11 February, media sources **reported** that 100,000 doses of the Russian-manufactured vaccine, Sputnik V, had been donated to the Syrian Ministry of Health (MoH). The news of the Russian donation is yet to be confirmed by the Russian government, and it is not clear what if any relation it bears to the Israeli deal. Sources indicated that the donated vaccines will target healthcare workers in state hospitals in Lattakia, Homs, and Damascus and its suburbs,

as well as healthcare workers in military hospitals across the country. Such geographic targeting — avoiding the recalcitrant south — is inherently suspect, while the targeting of military facilities demonstrates state priorities that fail to track with humanitarian principles. Moreover, how such vaccinations will be integrated with health surveillance or tracking systems to avoid serving the same populations already targeted under the COVAX programme is not immediately clear.

Of note, this follows shortly after the Chinese government **pledged** its own donation of 150,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine. Given that all such vaccine aid will likely be directly delivered to the MoH, the Syrian Government's own criteria will likely bear on beneficiaries targeting. Collectively, there are few discernable safeguards against favouritism and politicisation of vaccine rollout. On the other side of the equation, such donations are a public relations boon to donor states. That said, they fall far short of Syria's actual needs, suggesting that Syrians themselves will be left in the lurch, while the biggest winners will be the Government of Syria, Russia, and China. 🌸



Syria Update

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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Community Size

Greater than 1,000,000 Less than 1,000

Humanitarian Issues

Social

Security

Regional Intervention

Economy

Governance

- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Islamic State (IS)
- Turkish-backed opposition groups
- Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs)
- Government of Syria (GoS)



WFP: 60 Percent of Syrians Food Insecure

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

On 17 February, a report published by the World Food Programme (WFP) **stated** that a record 12.4 million Syrian — nearly 60 percent of the population — are now food insecure, an increase of 57 percent within one year. Alarming, the data indicates that 1.3 million people suffer from severe food insecurity, an increase of 124 percent from the previous year. The WFP report noted the need to revise its **2019-2021 Syria Interim Country Strategic Plan** to increase food assistance in line with increased needs.

No food for the hungry

Inflation, currency depreciation, and soaring living expenses have left millions of Syrians in urgent need of food assistance, and the situation will only get worse. According to WFP, the number of Syrians who are food insecure has doubled over five years, increasing from 6.3 million in 2015 to 12.4 million in 2020. Myriad factors have contributed to the dismal living conditions in Syria. The Syrian currency is currently at its lowest value on record, 3,300 SYP/USD on the black market, as of writing (see: **Syria Update 15 February 2021**). Together with sanctions and a lack of adequate assistance, the rapid depreciation of the pound has made food prices increasingly untenable for average Syrians. Food prices **more than**

A kilogram of chicken, for instance, comes to about 6,000 SYP (approx. 1.7 USD), or roughly 10 percent of an average monthly salary.

doubled from 2019 to 2020, while currency depreciation has continued to erode purchasing power.

For instance, local sources cite estimates that satisfying the basic nutritional and caloric requirements for a family of five in Damascus costs more than 200,000 SYP (60 USD) monthly. To ensure a relatively comfortable standard of living — notwithstanding frequent power outages and other service gaps — a Syrian family would therefore expend a minimum of 700,000 SYP (210 USD) per month. Yet, the current average public sector salary is around 55,000 SYP (16 USD), leaving most families woefully incapable of satisfying their basic needs. Local sources and widespread social media reports indicate that meat products are no longer accessible as part of an average Syrian's diet, given their high cost. A kilogram of chicken, for instance, comes to about 6,000 SYP (approx. 1.7 USD), or roughly 10 percent of an average monthly salary.

Although the WFP has pledged to revise its strategic plan for 2021 to serve the growing number of people in urgent need of food assistance, fundraising gaps remain. According to the WFP, the **cost** of food assistance for Syria reached \$1.16 billion in 2020, yet pledges fell far short, reaching only around \$332.7 million. Such

gaps are especially worrying given that donor fatigue is high, and the conflict that underlies the crisis has largely ground to a halt. Now, more than ever, humanitarian and development actors must bear in mind that although active conflict has diminished, basic needs persist. Given the long-term perspective on the Syria crisis, food assistance programmes are important. Yet, donors should also consider alternate methods of supporting the food sector, such as strengthening farming communities and ensuring the needs of farmers — in terms of agricultural equipment and fertilisers — are met. 



Belatedly, Damascus Disavows Property Confiscation for Deserters' Families

DAMASCUS

During an **interview** with the Syrian News Channel on 15 February, **Hasan Khaddour**, the head of the Consular Administration at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, denied swirling rumours concerning

the Syrian Government’s legal right to appropriate assets of the families of individuals who age out of the military service requirement without paying the costly waiver. Controversy on the issue has intensified since 2 February, when Colonel **Elias al-Bitar**, the head of the Syrian Arab Army’s Exemptions and Reserves Branch, publicly stated that the Government of Syria would confiscate the assets of Syrian males who reach the age of 42 without serving or paying the exemption waiver; al-Bitar also claimed that the state would seized the properties belonging to such individuals’ children or parents. In denying the rumours, Khaddour **emphasized** that any decision must be published on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website; he also criticised social media platforms for spreading rumors.

Misinformation, weaponised

The rumours concerning confiscations had roiled the Syrian diaspora in particular, but the latest denial — slow to appear and indecisive — will do little to diminish confusion. After al-Bitar’s original statement, nearly two weeks passed before any Syrian official used the power of a state office to refute his claim. The subject is of heightened importance; the supposed policy outlined by al-Bitar threatens the real estate that is often among the sole capital assets left to large portions of the Syrian populace, whether inside the country or abroad. It is of note that both al-Bitar’s original claim (seen by many as a threat) and Khaddour’s belated denial were made through media platforms, rather than more conventional formal government channels. As such, it is possible that the matter is not wholly settled. The Government of Syria

itself, or powerful local figures and security actors, could capitalise on persistent rumours, since the fear of confiscation may prompt individuals to pay the conscription waiver or sell their properties at fire-sale prices. 



Syria and Israel in Rare Talks over Detainee Exchange

QUNEITRA

On 17 February, Syrian state media **reported** that talks were underway between the Syrian and Israeli governments, **mediated** by Russia, regarding a **detainee swap**. According to SANA, the detainees included two Syrian residents of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, **who were reportedly released** on 18 February in partial exchange for “a young Israeli woman” who SANA reported crossed into Quneitra Governorate by mistake. After the detainees were released, it emerged that **Israel had facilitated** the deal by **agreeing to fund** the Syrian Government’s procurement of an undisclosed number of Russian-made Sputnik V vaccines. Various media sources reported that the **negotiations previously hit another snag** because two Syrians whose release was being negotiated were unable, or refused, to be repatriated to Syria. According to local sources, the Israeli was detained in early February, when members of a local militia came across her in Hadar, northern Quneitra, before turning her over to the Government of Syria.

Relatedly, on 15 February, **media sources** reported that Israeli airstrikes around Damascus had killed nine Iranian military personnel in arms depots. The attacks constitute the second round of Israeli bombing to target Iranian forces in Damascus this February. The latest airstrikes reportedly came days after drones targeted **advanced weapons** being transported through Iraq into eastern Syria by Iranian proxies.

Peculiar parley

The particulars of the incident prompt more questions than answers, with the bizarreness of the Israeli national’s crossing into Syria being compounded by Israel’s apparent willingness to procure vaccines in behalf of Damascus. Israel has not yet acknowledged procuring the vaccine for Damascus, which has approached negotiations inflexibly, including for humanitarian matters and aid access. It is worth noting that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s hold on office is tenuous, and sensitivity to domestic criticism may be a factor in the secrecy and willingness to cut a deal that are evinced by the deal. That said, publicly confirmed talks between Syria and Israel are a rare occurrence, and they are especially notable in light of a wave of **credulous reporting** of Damascus-Tel Aviv rapprochement. As the Syria crisis has grown increasingly complex and the conflict has slowed, speculation has mounted that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad may be willing to forge ties with Israel as part of a sweeping manoeuvre to end Syria’s diplomatic and political isolation. Such a gesture would have been received especially favourably by a Trump White House, yet no such

return is guaranteed now, and these rumours appear to have little, if any, basis.

Nonetheless, a detainee exchange with Israel may be seen as an important signal that Damascus is willing to engage foreign interlocutors in good faith, despite its domestic rhetoric (and its denial of the vaccine deal). Several additional points bear note. First, Russia's mediation is a key factor enabling the talks to move forward, evidencing its role as an entry point to Damascus. Second, the Syrian detainees' reported hesitance to be repatriated to Syria is notable. As conditions in the country worsen, pressures to leave or remain abroad at all costs will also rise. Finally, the recent Israeli airstrikes inside Syria suggest that the former's stance is unchanged and airstrikes will continue. 



Russia to Open Three Crossings between Idleb and Government Areas

IDLEB GOVERNORATE

On 15 February, Russian media, citing Deputy Head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation Major General Vyacheslav Sitnik, reported that Russia will establish three crossing points for those willing to leave opposition-controlled areas in Idleb and Aleppo governorates for Government-controlled areas. The crossing points will reportedly be established in

Saraqab, Mezanaz, and Abu Zeidain. "Economic deterioration and lack of proper healthcare in opposition-controlled areas due to the U.S. Sanctions" are the main reasons for establishing the points, Sitnik said. Furthermore, Omar Rahmoun, a member of the reconciliation committee in Hama Governorate, stated that the crossing points aim to allow those willing to reconcile with the Government and participate in the June election to do so.

De-escalation or escalation?

Throughout the conflict, such crossing points — often labeled "humanitarian corridors" — have presaged increasing violent attack on besieged and opposition-held areas. Such instruments have been employed by Russia and the Government of Syria to justify subsequent escalation, by claiming that remaining populations have refused to reconcile with the Government, or that opposition groups have impaired civilians' mobility to use them as human shields. In the current case, however, it is more likely, though by no means guaranteed, that the crossing points reflect political objectives rather than a planned military escalation. For instance, the measure may preemptively blunt claims that Syria's upcoming presidential election is not open to all Syrians, thus bolstering the election's legitimacy. Second, the three points may also ease commercial transactions between opposition and Government-controlled areas, including by facilitating access to Turkish goods and foreign currencies. That said, the risk of bombardment of opposition-held communities, especially near frontlines, remains probable for the foreseeable future. 



Astana Talks: More of the Same as Parties Deadlock

SOCHI, RUSSIA

On 16-17 February, the 15th round of the Astana (Nur-Sultan) negotiations track were conducted in Sochi, nearly 14 months after the last round, which followed Turkey's Operation Peace Spring incursion into northeast Syria. The summit comes after a trilateral meeting between the Astana guarantors — Iran, Russia, and Turkey — took place last month in Geneva, on the sidelines of the fifth meeting of the Constitutional Committee, which failed to yield any significant progress. The Astana talks emphasised the need for the Constitutional Committee to reach compromises, while pointedly rejecting timelines imposed by "foreign powers."

As is customary, the joint communiqué on the talks emphasised the parties' rejection of "separatist" schemes — a reference to the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — which "threaten the national security of neighboring countries" (i.e. Turkey) and "constrain Syria's sovereignty and territorial unity." The parties condemned the outbreak of violent confrontations in northeast Syria between the SDF and the Government of Syria, denouncing the "creation of facts on the ground under the pretext of fighting terrorism" as well as oil sales conducted by the SDF. It also

warned that permanent security and stability in the region will return only when the area is under the umbrella of the Syrian state. The declaration also expressed support for extending the current de-escalation in Idleb Governorate and condemned the imposition of “unilateral sanctions.” The parties invited Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq to attend the next round of talks — planned to take place in mid-2021, in Astana — as observers, seemingly a major piece of Russia’s as-yet fruitless refugee return plan.

Business as usual

Like the Geneva talks they are intended to supplant, the latest rounds of talks among Astana powers have suffered from diminishing returns. No doubt this is partly a symptom of slowdown in the conflict itself, which has seen its quietest year since the crisis began. It is also likely a result of uncertainty over pathways to attain objectives that are mutually agreeable to the three powers. It should not be lost on observers that the most obvious convergence is their mutual antagonism toward the U.S.-supported northeast Syria statelet. That said, their shared aversion to deadline-setting may reflect contentedness with the status quo, until a more favourable arrangement can be realised. That Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran can confidently decry foreign meddling in Syria and the dangers of “foreign parties” setting a deadline for the Constitutional Committee’s long-stalled work is a telling declaration of their confidence to steer Syria’s long-term fate.

According to Alexander Lavrentiev, Russia’s presidential special envoy to Syria, the Biden administration **refused** an invitation to attend the

conference. Washington’s absence from the talks is most likely an indication of refusal to legitimise a process that U.S. officials consider a charade, yet it compounds the effects of Washington’s continuing limited engagement with the Syrian diplomatic process overall. The Biden administration is chock-full of Obama-era staffers who are exercised by the U.S.’s failure to secure positive outcomes in Syria. How and whether they will lead a recharged push on Syria diplomacy is an open question. Certainly, it comes against a backdrop of status quo acceptance that is not limited to the Syrian Government’s allies. Echoing the sentiments of the Sochi communiqué, one Syrian opposition figure recently mused that the “final frontlines” between the Syrian opposition and the Government of Syria have solidified. 🌐



Direct Iran-Syria Shipping Line to Launch

LATTAKIA, LATTAKIA GOVERNORATE

On 14 February, the chairman of the Iran-Syria Joint Chamber of Commerce, Keyvan Kashefi, **said** that from 10 March a new shipping line would connect the Bandar Abbas port, located in southern Iran, to Lattakia. Shipments will take place monthly, possibility increasing to twice per month, if there is sufficient demand. The shipping line grants scope for the **first** non-oil transit line between Syria and Iran; it will likely carry produce, medicines, and

machinery. A main **reason** for the line’s creation is the fact that the Baghdad-Damascus highway “is not active and not reliable due to the U.S. presence in Tanf,” Kashefi reportedly stated.

Economic considerations, political ambitions

The initiative is by no means a game changer for Iranian-Syrian bilateral trade, which has been tepid despite persistent efforts to evade overlapping sanction regimes and shore up mutually embattled economies that have few exports and limited marketing capacity. Since 2019, several steps have been taken to expand commercial ties between Syria and Iran and to ease trade barriers, including the **establishment** of the Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, in January 2019, and the establishment of an **Iranian trade center** in Damascus, in October 2020, which has been designed as a launchpad for Iranian exports (see: **Syria Update 2 November 2020**). Notably, the latest step suggests three realities: First, due to the economic sanctions and limited financial capacity of Iran, direct financial assistance for Syria via an Iranian credit line for Iranian goods is expected to provide a market for Iranian private-sector exports. Second, shifting Iranian commercial activities toward the sea evinces the challenges impeding Iran’s overland shipping via Iraq, owing in part to instability in that country. It also suggests that in light of the U.S. presence at the Tanf border outpost on the Baghdad-Damascus highway, continuing military and security **challenges** facing Iran is anxious to avoid overreliance on the alternate Abu Kamal route. Third, intensifying Iranian activities in the Lattakia port could also be a manifestation of

ambitions to assert Iran's presence on the Mediterranean coast, in response to the Russian influence on display in the Tartous port. ❄️



'Child Parliament' Project Bolsters Baathists, Runs Afoul of Conventions

GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED SYRIA

On 14 February, [media sources](#) reported that primary schools in Government of Syria-controlled areas have been conducting Baathist electioneering under the banner of a project called "Child Parliament." The project began in February and involves educational activities, including songs. Published images show mock voting exercises, in which children cast votes in ballot boxes emblazoned with images of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The activities have been described on social media as "preparations for participating in the presidential elections."

Politics: War by other means

Syrian education has long been subject to ideological influence to reify the Baath Party's grip on power. Schools and universities have [long conditioned young Syrians](#) as part of the ideological and recruitment pipeline for the party. The Child Parliament project follows suit. Such attempts at political and ideological indoctrination possibly contravene the [Convention on](#)

[the Rights of the Child](#), to which Syria is a signatory. The convention [explicitly states](#) that "the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice." Additionally, politicised activities — such as Child Parliament — pose a risk to donor-funded education programming, particularly given the associated imagery and instrumentalisation by party officials. ❄️

>> 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.

Regime Government: Gasoline Supplies Are Still Suspended

What Does it Say? Fuel supplies are still suspended in Government of Syria-controlled areas. Since the start of the year, only two crude oil tankers have arrived in Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: If past is prologue, such shortfalls are likely to lead to further fuel rationing, cuts to subsidies, or price hikes.

Source: [Syria TV](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [17 February 2021](#)

4th Division Clashes with NDF Militia East of Al Mayadin

What Does it Say? The 4th Division and NDF clashed after the latter refused to pay taxes at a checkpoint when one of its trucks crossed with looted goods.

Reading Between the Lines: Resource competition is an important driver of localised militia confrontations which can be expected to intensify as both sides vie for supremacy in the war economy.

Source: [Deir-ez-Zor 24](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [17 February 2021](#)

Anti-Daesh Coalition to Set Up Military Base along Turkish-Syrian Border

What Does it Say? The U.S.-led anti-IS coalition will set up a military presence along the Turkish-Syrian border in order to combat any remnants of the group.

Reading Between the Lines: While the deployment’s stated purpose is to rout out IS forces, it is likely to serve as a buffer between Turkey and the SDF.

Source: [Arab News](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [16 February 2021](#)

>> Open Source Annex Continued

Syrian Widows in Jordan: The Suffering Created By Loss of 'Identity Papers' and Exacerbated by Their Absence

What Does it Say? The article examines the ways that a lack of identification papers has exacerbated the hardships of Syrian widows in Jordan.

Reading Between the Lines: Official documentation remains a key concern for Syrian refugees, many of whom fled the country without taking their papers with them. Providing substitutes or alternate forms of validation, including for vital records, civil documents, and HLP records, may be a vital way to serve women beneficiaries in particular.

Source: [Syria Direct](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [3 February 2021](#)

Sowing Scarcity: Syria's Wheat Regime from Self-Sufficiency to Import-Dependency

What Does it Say? The article is a lengthy review of the mechanisms and its response to environmental degradation and agricultural policy that led Syria from food abundance to a fateful reliance on imports.

Reading Between the Lines: Reliance on imports paved the way for those close to the regime, both on the black market and private traders, to benefit from sweetheart deals and corrupt mismanagement. By continuing down this path of over reliance on imports, Syria failed to properly develop its own agricultural systems which ultimately contributed to current food insecurity.

Source: [Jadaliyya](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [16 February 2021](#)

In Turkey's Safe Zone in Syria, Security and Misery Go Hand in Hand

What Does it Say? The article explores the role of Turkish forces in northwest Syria, which it describes as a stabilising force and the main reason behind a delay in offensives by the Government of Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: It is true that Turkish forces and arms in northwest Syria are the main defence against Government of Syria attacks. However, the stability imparted by their presence is set against other factors, including the reality that they constitute a major grievance of Kurds who were displaced from areas such as Afrin. That underlying grievance seeds continued tension, and is likely a factor in ongoing bombings in northern Aleppo.

Source: [The New York Times](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [16 February 2021](#)

ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review

What Does it Say? The piece tracks in numbers how IS changed its tactics in Syria in 2020, including its increased reliance on sleeper cells and guerilla tactics.

Reading Between the Lines: The piece includes several useful maps, and it casts light on a dynamic which Western observers will do well to heed: the Syrian Government's limited capacity to contain IS may lead to the group's long-term proliferation.

Source: [Newlines Institute](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [10 February 2021](#)

Syria: US Journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem Released by HTS after Six Months

What Does it Say? HTS released a journalist after imprisoning him for six months over his reporting on HTS's abuse and torture of prisoners.

Reading Between the Lines: Bilal is a noted figure among Syria watchers, and his release coincides with the group's increasing efforts to court Western support through an incremental de-radicalisation public relations strategy.

Source: [Middle East Eye](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [17 February 2021](#)

Outrage after Syrian Regime Imposes Sharia on Yazidis, a Minority Targeted by Genocide in Neighbouring Iraq

What Does it Say? The Government of Syria has reportedly taken steps to impose Sharia (Islamic law) on affairs relating to the minority Yazidi community, which had appealed to independent religious law to settle disputes and other issues inside the community.

Reading Between the Lines: Singling out the community may be seen as a form of punishment that stands in line with Damascus's increasing efforts to control the extent of religious discourse in Syria. Taking a hard stand against the minority sect may be a way to quell criticisms leveled by conservative Sunnis alienated by the Government.

Source: [The New Arab](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [17 February 2021](#)