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Quamishli Clashes Bring Arab-Kurd Tensions to the Surface

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An Asayish humvee sits in Tayy neighbourhood after the group seized control over the area from Government-aligned NDF fighters.
Image courtesy of Euphrates Post.



In one of the most intense eruptions of violence in northeast Syria in recent memory,

Autonomous Administration security forces have seized control over Tayy neighbourhood, the main Quamishli stronghold of the Syrian Government-aligned National Defense Forces (NDF). On 20 April, armed clashes **broke out** following a checkpoint dispute, setting off a series of on-and-off Russian-brokered deals. Large numbers of NDF members have reportedly fled the city toward nearby villages, while civilian residents of Tayy neighbourhood have also been displaced. The clashes are notable not only for their intensity, relapse into violence, and death toll, but also for the underlying tensions they reveal. The developments pose a significant test of Russia's capacity as a mediator in northeast Syria, and they have added to ongoing initiatives by Arab tribes in the region to attain greater autonomy even under the auspices of the Autonomous Administration.

The chain of events began with the arrest of Abdelfattah al-Lylo — an NDF commander and member of the Tayy tribe — by the Autonomous Administration's Asayish forces at a checkpoint in Al-Wihdah Circle (for more on the Tayy and northeast Syria's tribes, see: [Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria](#)). At least 10 NDF fighters and three members of the **Asayish were killed** in two days of fighting that ensued, as the opposing sides vied for control over Tayy neighbourhood. Although Moscow brokered a ceasefire on 20 April, the fighting resumed the following day as the NDF sought to

The gravity pulling large Arab tribes in northeast Syria toward overt political causes and factionalised armed groups may be a cause of additional tension, and it may fan the flames of local struggles for power between those tribes and the SDF.

take back control of checkpoints seized by the Asayish and affiliated Anti-Terror Units (HAT). A large number of residents of Tayy neighbourhood were displaced by the fighting, and **several** civilians were reported killed or wounded.

Between 22-25 April, Russia **facilitated** a series of meetings at Quamishli Airport between the Asayish forces and Government of Syria military officers to cement a ceasefire agreement in the city. The deal that came into effect on 23 April **entailed** a complete ceasefire, the return of civilian residents displaced by the fighting, and the deployment of Russian patrols around Tayy neighbourhood as observers. Like the agreement that came before it, however, the more comprehensive Russian ceasefire also broke down, and clashes expanded to Halko neighbourhood. On 25 April, Asayish **announced** what it characterised as a permanent ceasefire in the neighbourhood under the joint auspices of Russia and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and it urged all displaced residents to return to their homes.

Beyond mediation: Russia co-opts allies and enemies

The breakout of intense violence in Quamishli brings to the surface

two major fault lines in northeast Syria. The first is the extent of foreign influence in the region. Local sources indicate that Russia is using the events to pressure the Quamishli NDF, which Moscow is said to view as a liability. Tayy tribal leaders are said to have advocated against Russian mediation out of concern that Russia had allowed the process to drag on as the SDF-aligned forces gained the upper hand. Even the Government of Syria itself refrained from providing overt support to the embattled NDF, and its 154th Regiment, or **Tartab Regiment**, has sat on the sidelines during the clashes. Nonetheless, there is reason to believe Russia is also grasping for leverage over the Autonomous Administration's security forces. On 21 April, media sources **reported** that Russian forces unexpectedly withdrew from two military bases in northern Syria, near Tall Refaat and Deir Jmal, exposing them to attack from nearby frontlines with Turkish forces. Russia's stick-and-carrot tactics echo previous instances in which Moscow has pressured the SDF by permitting Turkish-backed forces to attack SDF positions (see: [Syria Update 7 December 2020](#)).

However, Russian prestige in northeast Syria is also being



Civilians flee Tayy neighborhood as clashes erupt between the Asayish and NDF. Image courtesy of Jisr TV.

challenged by Iran. **Media** sources now **report** that Iranian-backed militia groups have recently intensified recruitment in Quamishli and Al-Hasakeh cities, targeting Arab tribesmen, the NDF, and members of the 154th Regiment. Russia may still use its mediator role to pressure tribesmen to refrain from cooperating with Iran. Indeed, the Russian willingness to undermine the growing Iranian influence in the city has, to an extent, overlapped with the Asayish's hopes of expelling NDF members from Quamishli, reportedly one of the main objectives it pursued in the deal reached on 25 April.

The second, and arguably more important impact concerns the overt politicisation of Arab tribal identity in Syria's northeast. The Quamishli NDF is seen as an arm of the Tayy tribe, which is the most prominent in the city. The tribe's historical animosity with the region's Kurds primed the pump for the recent clashes, which have taken on clear tribal and ethnic dimensions.

During the latest bout of fighting in Quamishli, a notable figure in a clan belonging to Tayy tribe was killed by sniper fire following a mediation session. Tribes in Al-Hasakeh Governorate have generally sought to triangulate political positions that reduce their risk exposure from authorities of all types. In response to the latest incidents, however, various tribal leaders have urged Arab tribesmen to mobilise against the SDF, a sentiment captured in a 23 April **statement** released by the Tayy tribe. In response, on 25 April, a counter-statement by other tribal figures in Quamishli **urged** the Asayish and SDF to oust the NDF from the city.

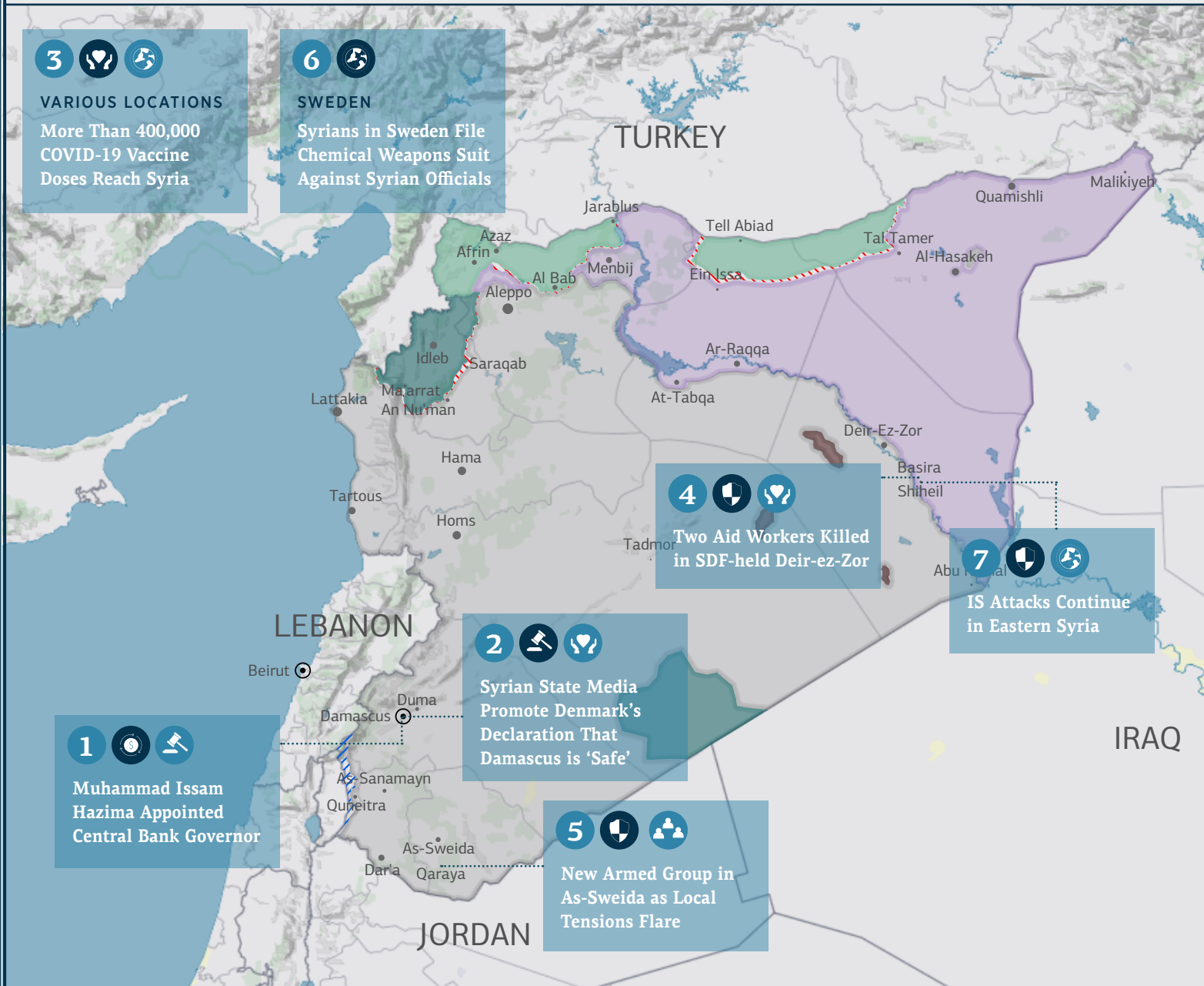
There are other signs that tribal identity and historical grievances are gaining force as political rallying cries. The relationship between Arab tribes and the SDF in northeast Syria has deteriorated over the last year for reasons including military conscription into the SDF and the poor state of service provision and the economy as a whole. On 12 March, local sources

reported that members of the Jabbour tribe convened a meeting in Tal Tawel, north of Al-Hasakeh city, to discuss the possibility of creating an explicitly tribal armed group. The formation would resemble the Sanadeed Forces, an armed group of the Shammar tribe, in that it would theoretically serve under the command structure of the SDF, thus fulfilling the military service requirement for tribesmen while allowing them to serve within their own communities. The gravity pulling large Arab tribes in northeast Syria toward overt political causes and factionalised armed groups may be a cause of additional tension, and it may fan the flames of local struggles for power between those tribes and the SDF. Economic considerations are also pertinent. Clashes between the Sanadeed Forces and the SDF on 5 February over **control** of the three border crossings with Iraq are illustrative of the linkage between armed groups and war economy activities. For aid implementers, issues such as these are also an indication that even as conflict-related violence in Syria is ebbing, deep social tensions may continue to grow. ❄️

Syria Update

“ Adding to an already unstable local environment replete with access challenges, the killings will complicate aid delivery in the southern reaches of SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. ”

See: Point No. 4 Below



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)




Muhammad Issam Hazima Appointed Central Bank Governor

DAMASCUS

On 20 April, Syrian state media reported that Muhammad Issam Hazima has been appointed Central Bank of Syria governor, replacing Hazem Qarfoul, who was dismissed as Syria's top banker without explanation earlier this month (see: Syria Update 19 April 2021). Hazima had served as second deputy to Qarfoul and holds a doctorate in international law from France.

Qarfoul out, Hazima in

The reasons for Qarfoul's dismissal remain ambiguous. While no official statements concerning the move have been made, two theories are circulating. The first posits that Qarfoul was ousted in response to the Central Bank of Syria's impotence in the face of extreme fiscal instability, a situation that reached its zenith with the Syrian pound's deterioration to 4,600 SYP/USD in mid-March. The second is grounded in rumours that Qarfoul had close ties with Rami Makhlouf, the economic titan whose national business empire has been systematically dismantled since he came into serious public conflict with the Presidential Palace in summer 2019. It has been suggested that Qarfoul's suspected relationship with Makhlouf cast doubt over his loyalties. Looking ahead to

Hazima's tenure, it is not clear what changes to Central Bank policy will follow from his appointment. Hazima is seen as an academic, and local sources have characterised him as more of a politician than a banker. This may reduce even the limited independent agency the office had. 



Syrian State Media Promote Denmark's Declaration That Damascus is 'Safe'

DAMASCUS

Syrian state media have begun to repackaging anti-asylum political sentiment in Denmark in a bid to shore up the Government of Syria's own narratives regarding conditions in Syria. On 17 April, the Syrian Arab News Agency reported:

"Now you can return home to sunny Syria, your homeland needs you" is a phrase spread widely across billboards in the streets of Copenhagen, the Danish capital, in a campaign that confirms the fact that Syria has become safe after most of its territories have been liberated from terrorism, and aims to encourage Syrian refugees to return to their homeland.


The Syrian state media coverage builds on a pitched debate in Denmark in recent weeks over the procedures that led to the Danish government's removal of temporary protection status for Syrian asylum-seekers originally from Damascus

and Rural Damascus. Earlier this year, the Danish government informed at least 94 Syrians that their residence permits in that country would not be renewed, a step that clears the way for their eventual removal from Denmark.

A propaganda victory for Damascus

The Government of Syria's ability to score cheap propaganda victories by drawing on the Danish refugee debate is a clear example of the political risks inherent to any actions that may be construed as normalising the Syrian Government. Damascus has a long history of validating its own positions by recycling favourable events from abroad. Particularly useful to it are developments that bear the legitimating stamp of Western government policy. As such, the Danish government's determination that Damascus and Rural Damascus are safe for returning refugees function as valuable propaganda in the hands of spin doctors in Damascus.

Meanwhile, the changes to Danish asylum procedures have not gone unchallenged. The government's decision to remove temporary protection status for certain classes of Syrian refugees in Denmark builds on the findings of a 2019 Country of Origin Information report which is now the subject of intense public scrutiny among the Danish public and Syria response actors. COAR is among the entities that are cited in the report. COAR and others have since publicly denounced the reporting process and its use to further a seemingly politicised approach to asylum proceedings for vulnerable Syrians. Worryingly, the events in Denmark undermine the already

fragile framework that governs asylum procedures globally. There is a risk that politicised approaches to refugee affairs will erode protections and inspire states with a shakier commitment to the rule of law to take similar, or more consequential, action. Refugees are already poorly served by prevailing asylum practices, and it is important for asylum policy practitioners to note that although conflict-related violence in Syria has diminished, security risks persist. **Nowhere in Syria is safe for return.** 



More Than 400,000 COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Reach Syria

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

On 22 April, Syria received the first 203,000 doses of its COVID-19 vaccine allocations via the COVAX facility. The vaccines will be provided to healthcare workers in Government of Syria areas and northeast Syria, according to a **statement by the WHO and UNICEF**. The regional allocation of the doses is not immediately clear. Separately, 53,800 doses were delivered to northwest Syria through

Gaziantep by WHO and UNICEF. Moreover, on 24 April, the Chinese government reportedly **donated** an additional 150,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Syria, which were received by the Syrian health minister in Damascus.

Vaccine diplomacy

Without question, the arrival of more than 400,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Syria is an important milestone for vaccination in the country. As always, concerns over equitable distribution are paramount, given that COVAX allocations on a per capita basis are lowest for northeast Syria. The arrival of additional doses reportedly donated by China are also important, given recent reports that delivery through COVAX would be delayed over production shortfalls. China's willingness to build bridges with Damascus through COVID-19 support is an important development, and it follows only days after the UAE **donated** medical aid and vaccines to Damascus. Support such as this will not necessarily change the fundamentals of either country's bilateral relationship with the Government of Syria. That said, the longer the COVID-19 crisis lasts, the more likely it is that medical aid can be used to strengthen relationships when other forms of support remain verboten. 

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Two Aid Workers Killed in SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor

BASIRA, DEIR-EZ-ZOR GOVERNORATE

On 17 April, two Syrian aid workers were killed in an armed attack in Basira, in SDF-held southeastern rural Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. According to **reports**, unknown attackers shot and killed the relief workers as they were returning from a humanitarian aid project. Both victims were volunteers working for the NGO Al-Birr and Al-Ihsan Ras al-Ain. The United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Imran Riza, issued a **statement** condemning the attack and calling for the protection of all aid workers.

An especially challenging area in world's most dangerous aid response

Adding to an already unstable local environment replete with access challenges, the killings will complicate aid delivery in the southern reaches of SDF-held Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Reports indicate that this is the first incident in which aid workers have been targeted in the area. Given its remoteness, local resistance to the Autonomous Administration, perceptions of administrative corruption, and the lingering consequences of Islamic State (IS) rule, Basira is a challenging area for aid implementation. In light of such risks, security factors are merely one conflict-sensitivity concern

among many. Nearly 1,000 aid workers have been killed in the Syria conflict thus far, and more than 3,800 are still in detention or have been forcibly disappeared. While northeast Syria is generally safer for aid workers than the northwest, attacks claimed by cells affiliated with IS, local tensions, and tribal disputes increase the risks implementers face. 




New Armed Group in As-Sweida as Local Tensions Flare

QARAYA, AS-SWEIDA GOVERNORATE

On 18 April, local media reported the formation of a small Druze local protection force in Qaraya in response to repeated clashes with bedouins from the surrounding area. Local and media sources have indicated that Russia has intervened as a mediator, facilitating meetings between the bedouin population and Qaraya residents in a bid to reduce tensions and remove barriers preventing bedouin families from returning to Qaraya. Media reports indicate that the local community in Qaraya has agreed to the bedouins' return, with the exception of some of those involved in previous armed attacks. Bedouins have been involved in previous violent clashes in Qaraya, particularly when backing the Russian-backed 5th Corps against

the Druze Rijal Al-Karamah (lit. "Men of Dignity") armed group (see: [Syria Update 5 October 2020](#)).

The limits of Russian mediation

The clashes — apparently motivated by disagreement over agricultural land — are a reminder that tensions in southern Syria are not limited to neighbouring Dar'a Governorate. As with past instances of tensions and violent clashes in western As-Sweida, Russia's mediation is essential, given the close proximity to the main power base of the 5th Corps in eastern Dar'a. Although Russia is indispensable in this respect, it is by no means all-powerful, particularly given the absence of direct relations with important stakeholders in As-Sweida. Mistrust of Moscow is especially high in the predominantly Druze governorate. 



Syrians in Sweden File Chemical Weapons Suit Against Syrian Officials

SWEDEN

On 20 April, four NGOs filed a lawsuit in Sweden against Syrian Government officials for their role in the sarin gas attacks in Ghouta in 2013 and Khan Shaykhun in 2017. Hundreds were killed in the incidents, and many more were seriously injured, including children.

The filing in Sweden came one day before an unprecedented vote by members of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to suspend Syria's voting rights in response to chemical attacks by the Government of Syria (see: [Syria Update 12 April 2021](#)). Syria is the first OPCW member state to face such an action.

Accountability measures are mounting

The lawsuit in Sweden is the latest of several initiatives to pursue accountability in Europe for crimes committed in Syria. Although at least 34 investigations, complaints, and legal cases were active as of February 2019, momentum has only recently built, following the prosecution of a Syrian Government agent in Germany on torture charges earlier this year (see: [Syria Update 22 March 2021](#)). A Canadian-Dutch initiative to hold the Government of Syria to account under the torture convention and an investigation into Asma al-Assad in Britain are two other recent developments. Often in partnership with international rights groups, Syrian lawyers, activists, and organisations have played a central role in this effort by identifying both victims and perpetrators, building legal dossiers, and advocacy. Meanwhile, Swedish authorities have issued electronic pamphlets asking anyone who has been a victim of a war crime, or knows a victim or a perpetrator, to contact the police. While these are small steps, given the broad sweep of violations committed in Syria, they are nonetheless important. Successful prosecutions are likely to inspire further efforts to pursue justice through mechanisms such as universal jurisdiction. 



IS Attacks Continue in Eastern Syria

SHIHEIL, DEIR-EZ-ZOR GOVERNORATE

On 20 April, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights **reported** that members of an IS sleeper cell attempted to assassinate an SDF intelligence officer in the countryside near Shiheil, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. On the same day, media sources **reported** that a suspected IS cell attacked an SDF military headquarters in nearby Sour, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate. Meanwhile, Russian-led air operations targeting IS have reportedly continued in Government-controlled areas across the Euphrates River, in the Badia area stretching across Hama, Homs, Deir-ez-Zor, and Ar-Raqqa governorates. Although its claims are dubious, **Russia has said** its recent airstrikes have killed some 200 militants and destroyed 24 vehicles and about 500 kilograms of ammunition and explosives.

The IS resurgence is slow but worrying

Although IS has increased its activities in many parts of Syria, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate is among the areas that are most receptive to the group's return. Over recent months IS-linked attacks and security incidents have increased in SDF-held areas, and of the approximately **40 security incidents** reported by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) in SDF territory since March, most are related to

suspected IS sleeper cells. A growth in IS activity in these areas speaks to the SDF's limited local acceptance and the shortcomings of its anti-IS campaigns supported by the International Coalition (see: **Syria Update 6 April 2021**). These operations will not curb IS' growth as long as local authorities remain ill-equipped to alleviate the root causes of IS activity, namely patchwork governance, fragile social and economic conditions, and exploitable rifts along ethnic lines. Moscow's counter-IS operations on the other side of the Euphrates River will be forced to confront similar challenges, and an approach to IS that is rooted solely in military attacks against suspected IS positions in the Badia — as Russia has waged since late 2020 — will also meet with limited success. That said, Russia's claims concerning its attacks on IS cells in the Badia are vague, unsubstantiated, and doubtful. ❄️

>> 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.

The YPG/PYD During the Syrian Conflict

What Does it Say? The article examines the YPG/PYD's authoritarian quasi-state project over the course of the Syrian conflict, during which it has simultaneously competed and cooperated with the Government of Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: The underlying political and social dynamics of northeast Syria remain under-studied, and they will grow more important over time as the conflict wears on. Internally, the dominant PYD has struggled to build a genuine big-tent political coalition in northeast Syria. Its control of oil and wheat fields will continue to shape the relationship with Damascus. Meanwhile, attempts to square the group with Turkey, which views it as a strategic threat, have yet to materialise.

Source: [Clingendael](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [19 April 2021](#)

Denmark: Flawed Country of Origin Reports Lead to Flawed Refugee Policies

What Does it Say? A highly selective Country of Origin Information report from 2019 has led the Danish government to deem Damascus and Rural Damascus safe for returns, which has been used to strip at least 94 Syrians of their temporary protection status.

Reading Between the Lines: The Danish report is already being instrumentalised by Damascus to push for refugee returns and legitimise its own rule, a foremost concern among foreign governments. The developments are evidence of the distinct secondary and tertiary risks that exist around actions that could be seen as normalising the Government of Syria.

Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [19 April 2021](#)

The Economic Crisis in Syria: Roots That Precede the Regime's War on Syrians

What Does it Say? The article calls attention to the sufferings of ordinary Syrians even as the ruling class finds new means of growing its own wealth. **Reading Between the Lines:** The stark divide between the opulence of the ruling class and the penury endured by ordinary Syrians was a key cause of the conflict. Without meaningful poverty-reduction approaches in place, socio-economic divisions are likely to widen and drive further conflict.

Source: [Syria Direct](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [25 March 2021](#)

>> Open Source Annex Continued

The SDF Will Not Allow Assad to Hold Elections in its Areas of Control

What Does it Say? The SDF will not allow balloting for the upcoming presidential election in areas under its control. As a result, voting in northeast Syria will be limited to the small Government-held security squares.

Reading Between the Lines: The move is not a surprise. With the American military presence in northeast Syria seemingly secured, the SDF is less likely legitimate Damascus' political agenda.

Source: [Al-Modon](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [21 April 2021](#)

For the First Time, a Woman Applies to Be President of Syria

What Does it Say? Faten Ali Nahar will be the first woman to run for the Syrian Presidency.

Reading Between the Lines: While Bashar al-Assad's re-election is not in serious doubt, some argue that allowing a female straw candidate is an attempt by the Government to portray itself as progressive and a defender of liberal values.

Source: [Los Angeles Times](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [20 April 2021](#)

Assad Regime Continues Stonewalling US Aid to Syria

What Does it Say? This article discusses the numerous constraints on aid programming in Government-held territory and delivering aid crossline from Damascus.

Reading Between the Lines: These impediments are not new. Expect to see similar articles with greater frequency as the renewal vote for the cross-border aid resolution approaches. What has been lacking is a concerted good-faith effort to grapple with possible incentives that can be held out to Russia to sustain the cross-border mechanism.

Source: [Foreign Policy](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [13 April 2021](#)

Sign of the Times: Caliphate and the Perils of Reporting Online

What Does it Say? The article lays out from a journalistic perspective how the New York Times failed in fact-checking and reporting its blockbuster Caliphate podcast series, which was later discredited when it was discovered that the protagonist fabricated the events that drove the central narrative concerning a foreign fighter who joined IS in Syria.

Reading Between the Lines: The incident is merely one of many examples of fabricated IS narratives and their uptake among a credulous public. All told, the furor over the Caliphate series calls attention to the sensationalism and misinformation that still inform broader understandings of IS and its legacy in Syria.

Source: [Harper's Magazine](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [2021 May](#)

Israel Targets the Dhameer Base: The Syrian Regime Did Not Bomb the Dimona Reactor

What Does it Say? In response to an alleged missile attack by Syrian forces near Dimona, Israel, Israeli forces retaliated by bombing an air base in Dhameer, killing a Syrian Government officer.

Reading Between the Lines: An offensive attack of this magnitude by Syrian forces shows that the conflict along the Syrian-Israeli border is not solely driven by Iranian proxies, and that a potential Syrian-Israeli peace deal remains highly unlikely.

Source: [Al-Modon](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [22 April 2021](#)

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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