

مركز حرمون

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Political Report

Political Report

December

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مركز حرمون
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Harmoon Center
For Contemporary Studies

Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies

An independent non-profit research institution that produces studies and research on the ongoing Syrian conflict, from its political, societal and intellectual aspects, and on its evolution scenarios. The institution strives to improve the performance of civil society, and to promote awareness about democracy, equal citizenship and human rights. It is one of the institutions of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha.

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Harmoon Observatory hires field monitors that report the most important changes in the actual conflict in Syria, from political, military, economic and societal aspects, from different regions and perspectives, in order to create an up-to-date knowledge for researchers and to provide decision makers with an image of the most significant development.

Harmoon Observatory

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Stalemate and conflicts are still ongoing in Syria and against it. The following report reviews the most prominent political events and stances that happened in Syria during the month of December:

American policy:

During the month of December, the US continued to grapple with the Syrian situation, as it remained in a static yet anticipating state, waiting for President Joe Biden's policy towards the Syrian issue.

The US still adopts a crisis management approach without trying to solve the crisis. Its tolerance towards Arab attempts of normalization with the Syrian regime coincides with statements from the American administration refusing to float the regime. At the same time, calls are mounting from Congress demanding an active role from the new American administration, because Russia is currently singularly handling the Syrian situation.

The former US special envoy to Syria James Jeffrey warned President Joe Biden's administration of the danger of keeping the Syrian crisis on the back burner and only focusing on the Iranian nuclear file. Jeffrey stressed that America is currently in a "stronger position" to negotiate with Russia on Syria for many reasons, mainly because Biden's Administration can apply political pressure and that "Russia is knee-deep in Syria's swamp".

In this context, the US House of Representatives passed a law requiring disclosure of the source of wealth of "Bashar al-Assad, his family" and his inner circle, and demands the US administration to announce a strategy for Syria. The US Treasury also imposed sanctions on individuals, mainly those involved with the use of chemical weapons, in addition to other entities. Republican Congressman French Hill called on Biden's administration to adopt a clear and firm policy towards "Bashar al-Assad" and to fight against drugs in Syria.

Russia

Russia's policy still revolves around re-floating the Syrian regime, and is still using force on the ground. During the year 2021 it greatly empowered the regime in Daraa, southern Syria, and participated in a few skirmishes in northern Syria, to achieve gains from the Turks in favor of the Syrian regime.

The non-stop pressure policy exerted by Russian President Vladimir Putin in support of the Syrian regime and its forces is crystal clear. In a speech during a meeting for the Russian Ministry of Defense on December 22th Putin reiterated his claims that the role of the Russian forces in Syria is to provide humanitarian aid to the Syrian population and to ensure stability. Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the US military presence in Syria will end sooner or later, calling on the Kurds to adopt dialogue with the Syrian regime.

The most expressive statements of Russian policy towards the Syrian cause were made by the Russian envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev who rejected the political process and the “constitutional committee”, and stressed that the upcoming constitution cannot aim to exclude Assad or end his authority. At the conclusion of two meetings with the delegations of Turkey and Iran within the Astana process talks, Lavrentiev said that the Syrian opposition is setting unacceptable conditions for the Constitutional Committee. Actually, he had expressed Moscow’s hope that the sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime by a number of would resolve in the year 2022.

This confirms that Russia still counts on the Syrian regime in order to achieve gains, now that it is using Syria as a negotiate ground with the whole world on other issues. It also seeks to achieve the largest economic gains in Syria by tightening control over Syria’s economy and strengthening its hold in the Syrian coast in general.

Day by day, the (Russian-Israeli) coordination has proved that it aims at neutralizing Iran, Russia’s current ally and competitor on Syrian territory.

In a joint statement on December 23rd the Russian and Syrian governments accused the United States of setting political conditions that impede the return of peaceful life in Syria, and that contradict UN Security Council resolution 2585.

Arab positions

The rush into normalizing with, and re-floating Al-Assad regime continues during the month of December 2021. In this light, the League of Arab States, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary General of the Arab League criticized the delay in Syrian regime’s return to the League, stressing that the subject of Syria’s return to the Arab League is not officially listed on the agenda, and so far, no country has submitted a written request, draft resolution, or official consultation in this regard.

The contradiction in Arab attitudes toward the Syrian regime surfaced again as the Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani reiterated his country's objection to lifting the suspension of the Syrian regime's membership of the Arab League, stressing it is "illogical" at the present time to normalize relations with the regime. The meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on December 17th saw Saudi ambassador Abdullah Al-Mouallimi attack the Syrian regime, refuting its allegations of victory over the remains of innocents and the rubble of homes.

On the other hand, the Kingdom of Bahrain announced on December 30th the appointment of its first ambassador to Damascus since nearly a decade. The King of Bahrain named Ambassador Waheed Mubarak Sayyar as head of the Bahraini diplomatic mission to the Syrian regime, with the title of ambassador plenipotentiary and extraordinary.

On the other hand, Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum spokesman Hamdi Abdel Aziz revealed Lebanese efforts to obtain American guarantees on exempting the countries delivering Egyptian gas to Lebanon, via Jordan and Syria, from the sanctions under "Caesar" law imposed on the Syrian regime.

In a statement marking the anniversary of Israel's decision to annex the occupied Syrian Golan Heights approved by the Knesset in 1981, the Arab League called for obligating the Israeli occupation to immediately stop all hostilities on the Golan lands. The Gulf Cooperation Council confirmed in the final statement after its 42nd meeting in Riyadh, the rejection of regional interference in Syria and attempts to bring about demographic changes in the country, stressing the need to resolve the crisis based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Also, Jordan and the Syrian regime announced the reopening of the joint Syrian-Jordanian free zone, at the Nassib-Jaber crossing between the two countries.

Lebanon continues to exploit the Syrian refugee's crisis claiming Syria has become a "safe country" and that "Syrians must return home." Lebanese President Michel Aoun called on the international community to assume its responsibility in facilitating the return Syrians displaced in Lebanon to their country, claiming that most areas in Syria are safe.

The United Nations and Europe

The United Nations is still absent from playing an active role in the Syrian crisis. It is trying to play the role of “facilitator” and focuses on addressing the Syrian issue strictly as a humanitarian crisis. However, it is unable to make real breakthroughs on the humanitarian front, which Russia seeks to exploit. It was noted that there is a clear failure by the United Nations and a significant decline in supporting education, medical services and displaced people living in camps. In this regard the United Nations is still trying to give the Syrians “fish” without teaching them to fish.

Among the most prominent events recorded in our December 2021 report, is the meeting held in Brussels to discuss the Syrian situation. The meeting was attended by representatives from the Arab League, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iraq, Jordan, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. The joint statement issued after the meeting called for the implementation of Security Council Resolution No. 2254, a ceasefire, the release of detainees, and the safe and unhindered delivery of aid.

On December 22nd the seventeenth round of the “Astana Process” meetings on the Syrian issue was concluded in the Kazakh capital, a day after it was held in the presence of the delegations of the three guarantor countries (Russia, Iran, Turkey) as well as of representatives of the regime and the opposition, and with the participation of the UN envoy Geir Pedersen, and observer delegations from the United Nations, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. United Nations Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen focused on a “step-by-step” approach, at a time when Pedersen faced major criticism for his failure to achieve any progress in the Syrian crisis.

During a session of the UN Security Council, Pedersen considered that the parties to the conflict in Syria had fallen 21 months ago into a “strategic impasse”. Pedersen had visited the capital Damascus at the beginning of the month and discussed with Syrian regime officials the work of the Constitutional Committee, after the failure of the last session of the committee last October. The Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres confirmed in a report to the UN Security Council that cross-border humanitarian aid to the Syrian people without approval by Damascus is still necessary, acknowledging progress in aid that passes through front lines in Syria.

During a session by the Security Council to review the 98th monthly report of the Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons on Syria's chemical program, the United Nations through the High Representative of the Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu called on the Syrian regime to cooperate fully with the Organization. The United Nations also adopted two draft resolutions, one on Jerusalem and the other on Syrian Golan, which Egypt submitted to the General Assembly.

As for the European Union, it continued to impose more European sanctions on parties and entities supporting the Syrian regime. In fact, on December 4th it renewed through its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the Union's position of refusing to politically recognize the Syrian regime and of refusing diplomatic relations with it.

In December a Danish court levied a fine of five million euros on a Danish company and its CEO specialized in supplying fuel, on charges of violating the European embargo on the Syrian regime by selling fuel to the Russian Air Force.

Western media sources reported that the European Union intends to impose sanctions on the clandestine "Wagner Army", which is active in several countries on behalf of the Russian army include it on the "black list", within the sanctions regime for Syria.

The European Court of Justice had lifted the sanctions against two Syrian businessmen, Bashar Assi and Khaldoun Al-Zoubi, and refused to lift them from two others, including Samer Al-Fawz a businessman close to Assad, knowing that Assi and Al-Zoubi run companies owned by Samer Al-Fawz. The move provoked a wide debate among many Syrians, including observers, human rights defenders, and activists.

On the other hand, the European Union Council imposed a package of sanctions against individuals and entities, against the backdrop of the migration crisis on the border between Belarus and the Union. The sanctions included the "Cham Wings" company affiliated with businessmen close to the Syrian regime, while the German Federal Prosecutor's Office requested during the trial of Former Assad intelligence official Anwar Raslan, that the latter be imprisoned for life.

Iran

During the month of December Iran sought to furthermore consolidate its in Syria, and began sending more delegations to strengthen its economic presence and penetrate the Syrian decision-making circles, while Israel is coordinating with Russia to control Iran and not surrender control to it.

The most important thing that was noted during December 2021: an Iranian official revealed the signing of 4 industrial cooperation agreements between the Syrian and Iranian regimes including the establishment of a joint bank, during Iranian Minister of Industry “Syed Reza Fatemi Amin” visit to Damascus. On Tuesday, December 28th, the head of the Iranian Hajj and Pilgrim Organization Ali Reza Rashidian held a meeting for the Planning and Coordination Council of the Hajj Organization Authority, with the aim of activating the new cycle of sending Iranian pilgrims to Syria, after announcing the approval from the Syrian side. Ali Asghar Haji adviser to the Iranian Foreign Minister, said that the meeting of the foreign ministers of the guarantor countries of the Astana process will be held in January-February of 2022.

On the other hand, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard militia established on December 9th a women’s institution in the town of Al-Tabani in Deir Ez-Zor, at the headquarters of Dar Al-Amal, with the aim of holding training courses in sewing, barbering and programming, aimed at attracting women in the region, especially the wives of militia members.

Media sources loyal to the Syrian regime revealed that an Iranian delegation arrived at Al-Baath University in Homs to sign a “scientific cooperation” agreement, in an event that aims for strengthening Iranian influence in the regime-controlled areas, and in an effort to extend Iran’s control over the most important sectors in Syria.

Turkey

Politically, Turkey continued its attempts to consolidate agreements with Russia, as evidenced by the recent Astana Conference, where Turkish officials, in meetings with their Russian counterparts, tried to stabilize front lines in northern Syria, and discussed the issue of controlling the “Syrian Democratic Forces”, and controlling infiltrations and attacks through the borders.

What was remarkable during December 2021 was the continuation of the position of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in holding the international community and the UN Security Council responsible for what is happening in Syria.

On December 10th the Turkish President criticized the United Nations Security Council for not assuming its responsibilities towards Syria, in a speech during the 16th Conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation parliaments in Istanbul. Also, the Turkish President emphasized in a speech in Gaziantep on December 26th that his country will always stand with the Syrians, and that the doors of Turkey will remain open to them at all times.

In the same context, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said in an interview with the Turkish NTV channel that Turkish-Russian communications on Syria “have become easier and are developing in a better way» after the recent meeting of the two presidents, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin”.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar described criticism by members of the “Syrian People’s Assembly” of the Turkish role in Syria as “reckless fabrications, and that there is no difference between them and the delirium of a person in a coma”.

Israel

The Israeli occupation state continued to identify with the international community by rejecting the Syrian regime’s possession of chemical weapons. The Israeli Minister of Intelligence Eliezer Stern stressed in an interview with the Israeli Army Radio, the “need to prevent” Damascus from acquiring chemical weapons, after the issuance of a report talking about Israel’s target of chemical facilities in Syria.

Moreover, the occupying power seems to be increasing settlements in the occupied Golan. On December 26th during a session held in the Golan Heights the Israeli government approved a plan to double the number of settlers in the occupied plateau.

Syrian regime

In December 2021, the regime continued its allegations regarding its stockpile of chemical weapons, in addition to accusing some Arab countries, including Qatar, of being behind the obstruction of its return to the Arab League. In addition to the ongoing security chaos and economic decline in its areas of control.

Syria's permanent representative to the United Nations claimed during a session of the UN Security Council that his regime continues to cooperate with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and demanded the need for removing weapons of mass destruction from the Middle East, "because they threaten regional and international peace and security," as he put it.

The People's Assembly of the Syrian regime issued a statement on the occasion of the 82nd anniversary of the annexation of Iskenderun by Turkey from Syrian control in 1939.

The Deputy Foreign Minister in the regime's government, Bashar al-Jaafari, accused the State of Qatar of obstructing Damascus' participation in the Arab League meetings, considering that Syria had risen above the pain it had suffered at the hands of " Hamas", as he put it.

According to December 2021 monitoring Syria ranked 165th in the classification of the world's countries in "Human Freedom" for the year 2021, according to the Canadian "Fraser Institute", in partnership with the "Cato" Research Institute.

In As-Suwayda Governorate the Syrian regime increased its attempts to regain complete control over the governorate, after the past year's protests against the regime and the emergence of armed factions in-fighting, and between the regime forces and its security services on the other hand. As a matter of fact, the regime forces strengthened their military presence in the province during December, and built up As-Suwayda National Hospital, amid significant security reinforcements from the Internal Security Forces and the 15th Division of the regime army in southern Syria.

Syrian opposition

The Syrian opposition is still unable to influence political events, and appears the weakest in terms of political action and international influence. Although there are attempts to reform opposition institutions to satisfy the Syrians, these attempts are still at the stage of discussions rather than actions.

The Syrians' discontent with the performance of the "Constitutional Committee" has increased. The Syrian opposition attempts to remain at the political negotiating table with the Syrian regime, without appearing as an obstacle to the international community, and to embarrass the regime confirming it is obstructing the political process, but the opposition's performance until now has not achieved any satisfactory result in this regard.

The weak performance of the opposition comes as a result of the decline in international interest in the Syrian issue, which prompted the opposition institutions to meet and support any international effort on the Syrian issue. The political body of the Syrian National Coalition warned that the international envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen's plan called "step by step", is not in favor of the political solution that the international envoy was authorized to run, but rather a plan that diverts the course of the political process from its purpose, and therefore will act in favor of the regime.

In a statement, the Syrian National Coalition renewed its support for the new sanctions imposed by America on figures from the Syrian and Iranian regimes implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield, at the UN Security Council, called for the establishment of a special judicial mechanism to prosecute those responsible for human rights violations, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Syria.

«Syrian Democratic Forces / SDF»

Security and humanitarian events were at the forefront of December's events in the areas controlled by the "Syrian Democratic Forces" in eastern Syria. A delegation from the International Coalition and the American forces discussed the subject of ISIS Syrian detainees at a court of the Autonomous Administration concerned with terrorism issues in the city of Qamishli. They also discussed the mechanism for releasing the organization's members from prisons and al-Hol camp, through tribal initiatives.

On the humanitarian side, security units affiliated with the (Syrian Democratic Forces / SDF) expelled 14 families from Deir Ez-Zor displaced from Tal Al-Saman camp on December 20th north of Raqqah, under the pretense there were security risks from their presence in the camp.

On the security front, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq closed the Semalka crossing, which links Iraq to Al-Hasakah governorate in northeastern Syria, after elements affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) attacked security guards at the crossing, despite the fact the crossing is the only access to outside northeastern Syria.

On the political front, Ilham Ahmed, executive president of the (Syrian Democratic Council / SDF), revealed the failure of Russian efforts to re-negotiate with the Syrian regime, stressing that dialogue and meeting with the regime does not

mean floating it and giving it legitimacy, while Riyad Darar, the co-chair of the (Syrian Democratic Council / SDF), stated that there was an American agreement that Russia would supervise the dialogue between the Syrian regime and the “Autonomous-Administration”, but he ruled out that there would be results from any dialogue, without an American green light.



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