

مركز OBSERVATORY HARMOON

حرمون

Political Report

January

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مركز حرمون
للدراسات المعاصرة
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.

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During the month of January, the Syrian opposition witnessed an increase in activity, with the former Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab, sending an invitation to hold a consultative research meeting in Doha in early February. Meanwhile, the UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, stepped up tours to those countries active on the Syrian front to promote his undisclosed plan towards a political solution, and to launch a new round of meetings of the Constitutional Committee. This came amid continued criticism by American lawmakers and politicians of the US administration's ineffective Syria policy and attempts by the administration to curb media statements that reject normalization with the Syrian regime.

Despite demands for greater pressure to be exerted against the regime, with a decline in the pace of Arab normalization, and widespread objection among Arab states to the Syria's participation at the Arab summit to be held in Algeria in March, both Russia and Iran have continued their efforts to consolidate the Syrian regime and re-integrate it into the Arab region.

As far as European policy is concerned, Europe still rejects normalization with the Syrian regime. In a landmark development, the German courts have started to prosecute those accused of crimes against humanity, with the prosecution of a former Syrian security officer, and a doctor accused of carrying out torture and abuse of detainees in a military hospital.

Several political events occurred during the month of January, the most important of which will be reviewed in this report.

American Policy

A number of American politicians expressed their objection to the Syrian regime's reintegration into the international community without the implementation of genuine reforms that demonstrate the regime's accountability and willingness to meet the demands of the Syrian people. In this context, the chief foreign relations committees of the US Senate and House of Representatives, and members from both committees urged the US administration to restore "America's leading" role in Syria. The former US envoy to Syria, Joel Rayburn, criticized the current US administration's position on Syria, and its failure to implement the Caesar Act, while the US State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, stated on the 13th of this month, that the United States does not support diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime, and that the regime cannot be rehabilitated, given the crimes it has committed against its own people. His statement came in response to the appointment by Bahrain of a new ambassador to Syria.

American officials and members of Congress rejected the administration's decision in Washington to allow the extension of a gas pipeline running through Syria, in violation of Caesar Act sanctions. In a letter handed to the Lebanese Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, the American ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, confirmed US approval for the transit of gas and electricity from Arab states to Lebanon, via Syria, to ease Lebanon's acute energy crisis. The letter mentioned the regional energy agreements concluded between Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and the Syrian regime.

The United States condemned the Syrian regime's attacks against vital civilian infrastructure in the Governorate of Idlib, and condemned the regime's obstruction of attempts to find a political solution in Syria. The US ambassador to the United Nations, Bathsheba Crocker, called on the regime to allow humanitarian aid to reach all civilians, and urged the government of Syria to stop arbitrary detentions and continued human rights violations.

Russia

Russia's policy still revolves around rehabilitating the Syrian regime and reintegrating it into the international community through improved relations with Arab states. In fact, shortly before his meeting with President Assad, the Special Envoy of the Russian President to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, visited Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the 20 January, in an attempt to change Saudi Arabia's position opposing Syria's return to the Arab League.

Russia continued to speak on behalf of the Syrian regime internationally and demanded a meeting of the UN Security Council regarding the latest developments in the situation in northeastern Syria, after an ISIS attack in Al-Hasakah. The Russian mission to the United Nations also accused the United States of strengthening the military positions of 'terrorists' from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and criticized the US for its failure to fulfill its obligations regarding cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria.

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said on the 14 January that it is necessary to start a serious dialogue with the regime about the conditions in which the Kurds are living in, while the Russian Deputy Foreign, Minister Oleg Siromolotov, renewed his accusations of terrorist groups being harboured in Idlib, ignoring the fact that the province shelters millions of civilians and those displaced by war.

The Arab position

The rush of some Arab countries to restore diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime was renewed during the month of January when Bahrain appointed, at the beginning of the month, Ambassador Waheed Mubarak Sayyar, as head of the diplomatic mission to the regime. Moreover, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Jibril Rajoub, visited the Syrian capital, Damascus, in the middle of the month and announced an imminent visit by the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, to Syria.

As for Jordan, its Prime Minister, Bishr al-Khasawneh, confirmed the ongoing security and military coordination between his country and the Syrian regime. The Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ayman Al-Safadi, justified Jordan's relation with the regime by stating its desire to bring about a 'serious political process' that would lead to an end to the ongoing crisis. In a meeting with his American counterpart, Anthony Blinken, in Washington, Al-Safadi discussed the Syrian file, at the same time that energy ministers from Lebanon, Jordan and Syria met to sign two agreements to supply Lebanon with electricity on the 26 January at the Ministry of Energy building in Beirut.

The Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, continued to blame the Syrian war for the crisis in Lebanon, and reiterated his concerns during a meeting with the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly.

In Doha, Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, held talks with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, and stressed that any political solution to the Syrian conflict should be in accordance with UN resolutions, in particular, UN Resolution 2254. The Qatari Foreign Minister also met with a delegation from the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), and another from the opposition Peace and Freedom Front.

The Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, reiterated that his country was looking forward to the Syrian regime taking measures that would facilitate its return to the Arab League.

The United Nations and Europe

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons continued its pressure on the Syrian regime for the use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians, against the background of ongoing trials of perpetrators of human rights violations conducted in German courts.

The United Nations is still absent in the Syrian file, and its efforts are largely limited to humanitarian concerns. The UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, continued his regional tour in an attempt to achieve some kind of political solution to the Syrian crisis. Following a meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister in Tehran, Pedersen received widespread criticism from the Syrian opposition groups for statements in which he described the situation in Syria as being 'stable' and claimed that the opposition parties were no longer demanding the overthrow of the Assad regime.

In an address to the Security Council, on the 27 January, Pedersen called for 'serious diplomatic discussions to build confidence between the Syrians and other stakeholders,' stressing that 'the military solution remains an illusion.'

In January, a United Nations spokesman reiterated the UN's position that humanitarian aid must pass across the border to Syria without the need for a permit from the Syrian regime. Without a new vote in the Security Council.

On the 12 January, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, submitted a report to the UN Security Council, citing figures that highlighted the reality of the humanitarian situation in Syria. According to the figures, nine million Syrians live in areas not under the control of the Syrian regime, of whom 5.6 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. In addition, 90% of Syrians now live below the poverty line.

On the 13 January the United Nations announced the allocation of \$25 million in aid to support relief operations in Syria, and demanded that steps be taken to preserve the safety of aid workers and health care providers in camps in northeastern Syria, after the death of a Syrian aid worker in an armed attack on a health center in Al-Hol camp.

Regarding the trials of those accused of crimes in Syria, on the 13 January, the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany, sentenced Anwar Raslan, an officer in the Syrian security forces, to life imprisonment, for crimes against humanity carried out in Syrian regime detention centers in Damascus. In a statement on the 13 January, the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria welcomed the ruling of the Koblenz Regional High Court, and stressed the need for more efforts to achieve justice for Syrian victims and survivors. The

European Union renewed its call to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), after the conviction of Raslan.

A second trial began in a Frankfurt court in Germany of a pro-regime Syrian doctor, Alaa Moussa, accused of the murder and torture of wounded people arrested by the regime's intelligence services.

In mid-January, the representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, confirmed, that the Syrian regime had not fully complied with Security Council Resolution No. 2118 issued in 2013, regarding the elimination of chemical weapons, and called on the regime to respond to 20 out of 24 issues that remain unresolved. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed that ISIS used mustard agent in an attack it launched in 2015 on the town of Marea, north of Aleppo, that injured at least 20 people.

On the 5 January, France condemned, attacks launched by the Syrian regime and Russia in Idlib. The right-wing presidential candidate in France, Eric Zemmour, said that the consulate in Damascus should be reopened, and that it was a mistake to have closed it and to have demonized Assad.

On the human rights front, a Human Rights Watch report said that elections held by the Syrian regime in May 2021 were not fair, and coincided with the practice of arbitrary arrest and torture. The report documented violations carried out by various parties, including the Syrian-Russian military alliance.

Iran

Due to Iran's preoccupation with nuclear talks with the international community, the issue of Syria was largely left off its political agenda. In a speech delivered to the Russian Parliament, the Duma, on the 20 January, the Iranian President, Ibrahim Raisi, thanked Russia for its role in Syria, and said that the Iranian and Russian joint efforts to support Syria had born fruit, in large part due to what he considered to be 'the steadfastness of the Syrian people.' In a press statement, the Iranian ambassador to Damascus, Mahdi Sobhani, called on the US to leave Syrian territory.

Turkey

Throughout January, Turkish policy focused on confronting the threat posed by Kurdish militias to Turkey's national security. On the 15 January, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar warned of his country's impatience with attacks carried out by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) targeting Turkey from inside Syrian territory, after the killing of three Turkish soldiers in an attack on the border with Syria.

Israel

Israel continued its policies of maintaining military and political coordination with Russia in Syria. The Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, confirmed that Tel Aviv was doing its best to ensure the safety of Russian soldiers in Syria when carrying out raids on Iranian militia sites. An Israeli official confirmed to the Israeli newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, that Israel views positively the rapprochement between Bashar al-Assad and the Gulf states, and that this rapprochement would ultimately lead to the exclusion of Iran from Syria.

Syrian regime

In January, the regime diverted its political efforts towards the international level, in order to assert its stability and control over Syria. A series of meetings were held by the regime with Arab officials, including officials from Palestine and Bahrain. The regime renewed its criticism of the United States and Turkey for their support for the Syrian opposition and occupation of Syrian territory. Domestically, charges were levelled against the Kurds for plotting against the Syrian state, and the government called on the Kurds to cooperate with the regime. In a press statement on the 13 January, the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Miqdad, said that 'Damascus views the Kurds as part of the Syrian people, but there are those who had sold themselves to the devil.' Miqdad threatened the United States to have its forces expelled from Syria by 'other methods,' if it did not withdraw them voluntarily, and repeated earlier accusations that the United States had stolen Syrian oil, wheat and cotton, through its support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned actions that led to the displacement of thousands of Syrian citizens in the Governorate of Al-Hasakah and demanded the withdrawal of US and Turkish forces from the northeast and northwest of Syria. On the 18 January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an attack

against the European Union, accusing it of losing its independence, and becoming entirely dependent on the United States.

On the 25 January, Bashar al-Assad issued a general amnesty for the crimes of internal and external flight, on the condition that those accused surrender themselves voluntarily. Unsurprisingly though, the amnesty does not include any of the opposition figures wanted by the Syrian security forces.

Also on the 25th, residents in the city of As-Suwayda staged a sit-in next to the justice palace, in protest against a rise in crime and chaos throughout the governorate, and demanded greater levels of accountability

The Syrian opposition

The Syrian opposition is still suffering from an inability to assert itself as an important actor in the international efforts on the Syrian issue. There have been renewed calls for the reform of its institutions and the development of a clear strategy towards a political solution, especially within the work of the constitutional committee, which has not been achieved so far. Responding to these criticisms, the Syrian opposition and its institutions have become increasingly active, holding a symposium entitled 'Where is Syria going?', in Doha on the 5 and 6 February 2022, at the invitation of the former Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab. The opposition delegations held several meetings with Arab and international officials. The head of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), Salem Al-Maslat, visited the Qatari capital, Doha, accompanied by the head of the Syrian Negotiations Committee, Anas Al-Abdah, where they met the Qatari Foreign Minister and other figures from the Syrian opposition.

Al-Maslat, sent a message to the government of Kuwait, expressing his hope that Kuwait would continue to support the displaced population in the camps of northern Syria, and provide adequate heating in the camps during a 'harsh' winter. Al-Maslat also met with the head of the Immigration Department in Istanbul, Bayram Yalinsu, and his deputy, Serdar Dal, to follow up on the conditions of the Syrians in the city, and to address any challenges they face.

Meanwhile, in his meeting with the UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, in the Qatari capital, Anas Al-Abdah stated that the US State Department had informed him in late January that there would be no exceptions to the Caesar Act sanctions with regard to facilitating the passage of Egyptian gas to Lebanon via Syria.

As a result of the tragic conditions experienced by the displaced population in northern Syria, the Syrian Interim Government has warned of a humanitarian catastrophe due to the continued interruption of support for a number of hospitals that provide services to millions of civilians in the region. On the 21 January, the village of Deir Hassan in the northern countryside of Idlib witnessed a protest by dozens of demonstrators against arbitrary arrests carried out by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Autonomous Administration / SDF

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which controls areas in north and east of Syria, dominated by Kurdish fighters, carried out violations against civilians and political activists in areas under its administrative wing in the Autonomous Administration. Arbitrary measures were taken by the SDF against residents of the Arab neighborhoods in the city of Al-Hasakah, following an attack by the Islamic State on a prison holding thousands of ISIS members in the neighbourhood of Ghweran.

The Autonomous Administration called on all local and international organizations operating in areas under its control to provide it with information about the number of employees, their positions and salaries.

In a statement in response to SDF violations, that sparked a wave of popular anger, the Kurdish National Council called on the US to intervene in order to stop SDF abuses.

Popular anger also increased in areas adjacent to the Autonomous Administration, as a result of attempts by the Syrian regime and Iranian-backed militias to penetrate these areas. On the 13 January, demonstrations took place in the village of Al-Izba, north of the governorate of Deir Ez-Zor, which is controlled by the SDF, to demand that regime forces and Iranian militias leave the areas they control east of the Euphrates River. The Syrian regime's announcement of the establishment of so-called 'security settlements' for Al-Raqqah triggered the anger of local residents, and was rejected by the clans who consider it as a direct threat to the 'stability' of the city and its surrounding countryside.

Threats from ISIS appeared when leaflets were plastered on the walls of several mosques in the eastern countryside of Deir Ez-Zor. This included direct threats to medical staff and the local population, accused of cooperating with the International Coalition and SDF forces. These threats emerged a few days after the killing of a doctor, Abdul Mufdhi, claimed by ISIS forces.

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