



## **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 forms one of the institutions of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha.

### **Harmoon Observatory:**

The 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 up-to-date knowledge for researchers, and to provide decision makers with an understanding of the most significant developments.

## **Harmoon Observatory**

### **Political Developments in the Syrian Conflict - February 2022**



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## An Executive Summary

Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been at the center of international attention, it has put the spotlight back on the Syrian issue, and made international officials more willing to understand Russia's role in Syria, given that Russia is using the same tactics in Ukraine as it did in Syria. Syrian opposition groups see Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to re-engage the world's interest in Syria, and reignite debate on the necessity of reaching a political solution based on international resolutions and a peaceful political transition.

In contrast to the Syrian regime which rushed to declare its support for the Russian invasion, despite widespread international condemnation, Syrian opposition groups have expressed their solidarity with the Ukrainian people, seeing in international efforts to confront Putin's war an opportunity to shed light on Russia's role in Syria and its many crimes committed there. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and called for international action to deter Russian aggression in both Ukraine and Syria.

Syrian opposition groups attempted to organize themselves more effectively as an institution, at a symposium held in Doha entitled, "Syria, where to?" This failed to meet expectations, and only resulted in recommendations, rather than the formation of a new organization.

Meanwhile, the United States continued to target the Islamic State (ISIS), viewing its elimination as its most important foreign policy objective in Syria. On February 3, US forces killed the organization's leader in a special operation in northern Idlib, and reiterated its objection to normalization with the Syrian regime, and its support for a political solution in Syria, as well as the continuation of humanitarian aid.

At the international level, regarding efforts towards a political solution, the UN envoy, Geir Pedersen's "step for step" approach remains at the center of his attempts to negotiate a settlement between the Syrian parties. The Syrian opposition has repeatedly criticized Pedersen's approach, describing it as ambiguous and warning that it breaches UN Resolution 2254 which aims to achieve a political solution based on a political transition.

A fact-finding mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) continued to pressure the Syrian regime, and issued a report indicating that the regime army had used chemical weapons in the bombing of the town of Kafr Zita in the northern countryside of Hama in 2016.

Human Rights Watch accused the Kurdish militia of committing violations in its prisons against child detainees accused of belonging to ISIS, and called for the provision of humane treatment for all inmates.

In terms of developments among Arab states, the conditions for the return of the Syrian regime to the Arab League has yet to be fulfilled, because of the lack of an Arab consensus over the issue. While Arab states, including Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Emirates and Bahrain, have attempted to facilitate Syria's return to the Arab League, this move is largely opposed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In Europe, sanctions have been imposed on members of the family of Muhammad Makhoul, an uncle of President Bashar al-Assad, who is close to the Syrian regime. The Council of the European Union imposed sanctions on five women, who are the wives and daughters of Makhoul.

In this report, we review the prominent political events that occurred during the month of February and the main developments that emerged following them.

## **US policy**

In February, the United States continued to focus on implementing one of its key priorities in Syria and the region, namely the elimination of the Islamic State.

Towards this aim, the US President Joe Biden announced on February 3, that his country's military forces had delivered a significant blow to the extremist organization, with the assassination of its leader, Abdullah Qardash, otherwise known as Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashemi Al-Qureshi. The killing occurred in a special operation in the Atmeh area, north of Idlib, which also resulted in the deaths of 13 people, including six children and four women.

The deaths were confirmed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) which also stated that and one girl had sustained serious injury in the American landing operation in which the ISIS leader was liquidated.

As for Washington's policy goals in Syria, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Ethan Goldrich, stated on February 18 that his country's priorities were to support a political solution in Syria on the basis of UN Resolution 2254, and to support continued humanitarian assistance to civilians. He also stressed the need to keep up pressure on ISIS, while maintaining the ceasefire, and preserving the principle of accountability of the Syrian regime. These were the same points Goldrich had included in a speech he delivered on February 6, to Syrian opposition groups who had gathered at the "Syria, Where to?" seminar hosted by the dissident former Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab, in the Qatari capital, Doha. In that speech, Goldrich stressed that the US would not normalize relations with the Syrian regime. His comments were opposed by the former US envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey, who stated in an interview with the CNN TURK channel on February 9, that the current US administration does not have any comprehensive strategy to solve the problems in Syria.

At a press conference on February 1, commenting on a visit by an Omani delegation led by Oman's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Badr bin Hamad bin Hamoud Al Busaidi, to Damascus, the US State Department spokesman, Ned Price, reiterated Washington's rejection of any attempt to normalize relations with the Syrian regime.

American lawmakers renewed their warnings about the failure to implement the Caesar Act sanctions. On February 1, Senator Jim Rich from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and US Representative Michael Cole from the House of Representatives, sent a joint letter to the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, warning the government that energy deals facilitated by the Biden administration between Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt, would undoubtedly enrich the Syrian regime and exacerbate corruption in Lebanon.

## Russia

Official Russian contacts with the Syrian regime declined in February, with Russia preoccupied with its preparations for the invasion of Ukraine. Visits were limited to a meeting, on February 15, between the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, and the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, in Damascus to inspect the exercise of Russian naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean.

Russian President, Vladimir Putin, accepted the Cabinet's proposal to sign an extradition agreement between the Russian Federation and Syria on February 18. The Russian Ministry of Justice was instructed to sign the document on behalf of the Russian Federation, when an agreement was reached with the Syrian side. This agreement carries the risk of Syrian opponents who reside in Russia or those who pass through its territory, of being handed over to the Syrian regime by Russia. This would include anyone critical of the regime and its actions, considered as terrorists by the regime.

As part of Russia's efforts to involve the Autonomous Administration/SDF in the constitutional committee, in an interview with the Russian channel RT on February 17, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, stressed the need for Kurdish representatives to participate in the process of constitutional reform in Syria. This would, in his view, "preclude accusations of secession."

Regarding Russia's position on Israeli operations carried out inside Syria, the Russian embassy in Tel Aviv said in a statement that military coordination between it and the Israeli side in Syria continues to be ongoing. Russia expressed its support for Israel's security needs, while opposing what it called any "violation of Syrian sovereignty."

In a statement on February 23, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service repeated its accusations of Washington's support for the Syrian opposition, accusing US intelligence of plotting to incite what it called "extremists" in Damascus and Lattakia to carry out specific actions against Syrian, Iranian and Russian forces in those regions.

In an unusual step, Russia intervened in protests that erupted in As-Suwayda governorate against the Syrian regime, which would normally be considered an internal matter. On February 11, a Russian military delegation visited As-Suwayda, and met with the governor and the head of the State Security branch, in order to reach a settlement that would assuage the protesters.

## Arab states

During the month of February, there was no official visit from any Arab country to Damascus, which may indicate a decline in the enthusiasm by some Arab states to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, and a failure to reach an all-Arab consensus regarding Syria's return to the Arab league as well as its attendance at the Arab summit to be held in Algeria in November of this year.

This was confirmed on February 2 in a statement by the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Ahmed Abou el Gheit, to Jordanian media in which he claimed that Syria's return to the League was dependant on an "Arab consensus" and on the Syrian regime's approval of the proposed Arab positions. It was also confirmed by a Jordanian channel reporting an official in the Arab League who denied that an Arab ministerial meeting was held in March to discuss Syria's return to the League.

In the same context, on February 2 the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani, ruled out Qatar's normalization with both Israel and the Syrian regime, even if this was adopted by other Arab countries. His remarks came at the same time that the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, called on February 18 for the Syrian regime to be readmitted immediately to the Arab League.

## The United Nations and its organizations

The UN's role in Syria is still largely determined by the efforts of its envoy, Geir Pedersen. After a series of meetings held with officials from the Syrian opposition, the Syrian regime, and Arab officials in Egypt, Jordan and Qatar, Pedersen expressed his hope that the seventh round of meetings of the Syrian Constitutional Committee would be held in March. He also met with Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to promote his so-called "step for step" plan, which was rejected in a statement by the Syrian opposition.

In the same context, the press office of the UN envoy to Syria announced that two rounds of talks would be held after the seventh round, in May and June. Pedersen expressed his concern that the conflict in Ukraine would negatively affect the ability to find a solution to the Syrian crisis.

Regarding other activities of UN and international organizations, an investigation by the OPCW fact-finding mission concluded that there are “reasonable grounds to believe” that a chemical agent was used as a weapon during the bombing of the town of Kafr Zita in northern Hama in October 2016.

In a report published by Human Rights Watch, the organization accused the Kurdish militia of committing violations in al-Hasakah, which led to the loss of contact with hundreds of boys from al-Sina’a Prison in the Ghweran neighborhood of al-Hasakah, where members of ISIS and their families are being held under the supervision of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The organization called for the humane treatment of all inmates.

Amnesty International called on countries to repatriate thousands of their child nationals from the Al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria, and to take effective measures to end the “atrocities” committed in the camp which shelters families of ISIS fighters.

## **The European Union**

In a press statement on February 20, the French Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Nicolas de Riviere, expressed his pessimism about the progress of the constitutional process in Syria, and said that the political and constitutional process has become a “joke.”

In France, the Paris Public Prosecutor’s Office opened a preliminary investigation against the French organization Protect the Christians of the East for its involvement in war crimes in Syria, as a result of its partnerships with a number of pro-Assad Syrian militias also implicated in carrying out war crimes in Syria. The investigation was entrusted to the Central Office for the fight against crimes against humanity and hate crimes in France.

On February 21, the European Union placed sanctions on the two widows and three daughters of the Syrian businessman, Mohammad Makhoul, an uncle of President Bashar al-Assad. According to the EU, the women are Makhoul’s first widow, Hala Tarif Al-Maghout, his second widow, Ghada Adeb Muhanna, and his three daughters Shahla, Kinda, and Sarah.

On February 17, Australia announced the inclusion of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the Guardians of Religion Organization on the list of banned terrorist organizations.

## Iran

Due to Iran's preoccupation with the talks on its nuclear dossier with the international community, Tehran's focus on the Syrian issue has declined, and there were no visits carried out by any Iranian officials to Syria in February. However, on Sunday February 27, Major General Ali Mamlouk, director of the Syrian regime's National Security bureau, visited Tehran where he met the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani.

On February 16, Iran, which has provided military support to the Syrian regime, announced in a press statement through its ambassador to Damascus, Mahdi Sobhani, its readiness to offer Syria the expertise it has gained from facing Western sanctions.

Repeated reports of an imminent conclusion of a new agreement on Iran's nuclear programme under the Vienna talks, caused concern among Syrian opposition groups worried about the impact that such agreement would have. Of particular concern is the prospect that lifting sanctions on Iran might grant it greater financial and political power over Syria, and provide it with an increased ability to interfere in the internal affairs of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, which in turn would negatively affect a political solution in those states.

## Turkey

In February, Turkish policy focused on confronting the Kurdish militias in northern Syria and Iraq. A statement was issued by the Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman, Tango Bilgic, on February 4 in which he commented on the killing of the ISIS leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi Al-Qurashi, in northern Syria and confirmed Turkey's rejection of the idea of cooperating with one terrorist organization in order to eliminate another, in reference to the SDF.

On February 9, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, met with the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, and discussed developments in the work of the Constitutional Committee. Cavusoglu stressed that the meetings of the Constitutional Committee were the most important steps towards finding a political solution to end the conflict in Syria.

## Israel

Israel continued its efforts to ensure ongoing coordination with Russia regarding the military strikes launched by the Israeli army against Iranian militia sites in Syria. Israeli security officials expressed concern that Russia might limit the freedom of Israel's operations in Syria, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and raised concern over the possibility of Israel having to implement Western sanctions against Moscow.

The visit of the spiritual leader of the Druze community in Palestine, Sheikh Muwafaq Tarif, to Moscow on February 15, and his meeting with Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, and the Russian President's Special Envoy for Syria Affairs, Alexander Lavrentiev, reignited the debate over the future relationship between members of the community in both Syria and Palestine. The visit also highlighted Russia's role in diffusing popular protests that had erupted against the Syrian regime in early February calling for an improvement in the security and economic situation in As-Suwayda.

## The Syrian regime

During the month of February, there was no noticeable political activity by the Syrian regime, except for statements of support for Moscow in its recognition of the secession of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On February 21, the Syrian Foreign Minister conducted a visit to Moscow where he met the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and head of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Russian State Duma, Leonid Slutsky.

The Syrian regime reiterated its support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine on a number of occasions. On February 25, during a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, expressed his support for Russia's military operation. In a statement published on the platform of the Presidency of the Republic, Assad argued that Russia's actions in Ukraine constitute "a correction of history, and a restoration of the balance the world lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union."

In a statement on February 27, the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed that Russia has every right to defend itself and its people against imminent danger, in the face of attempts by the West and the United States that threaten its national security and target its stability.

As for relations with Iran, the Director of the National Security Office, Major General Ali Mamlouk, met with the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, during a visit to Tehran on February 27 to report on the security situation throughout Syria.

Regarding the Syrian regime's relations with Turkey, the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Miqdad, stipulated, during a press conference at the Valdai Forum in Moscow on February 22, that in order to normalize relations with Turkey, Turkey has to withdraw its forces from Syria, stop supporting "terrorists," allow the Syrian population to gain access to water resources, and build relations with Syria based on what was described as "mutual respect."

On February 16, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, met the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Miqdad, in Damascus to discuss issues related to the work of the Constitutional Committee and the seventh round of meetings to be held in March.

## The Syrian Opposition

In February, the Syrian opposition was active on many fronts. Several meetings and seminars were held, and opposition figures met with Arab and international officials. Notable during this period was the opposition's rejection of the "step-for-step" approach put forward by the UN envoy Geir Pedersen. The opposition also launched a number of initiatives for the formation of political, administrative and military opposition inside Syria.

The most prominent activity launched by the opposition at an organizational level was the "Syria where to?" seminar held in the Qatari capital, Doha, on February 5-6 at the request of the dissident Prime Minister, Riad Hijab.

Among the participants were representatives from the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces who reviewed developments and discussed how to achieve a political transition and enhance the performance of the Syrian opposition, as well as talks on future scenarios for Syria. Despite much anticipation, the recommendations of the symposium do not break any new ground in resolving the Syrian conflict. The symposium did however, receive international attention, and its opening session was attended by a number of officials from more than one country as well as a number of ambassadors, in addition to the presence of the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Ethan Goldrich, who met with officials from the Syrian opposition, including the head of the Syrian National Coalition, Salem al-Maslat, and the former Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab.

On February 20, representatives of independent Syrian bodies, organized the Syrian International Forum in Istanbul, entitled “No to Normalization with Assad” in order to counter the decision by some Arab states to normalize relations with the Syrian regime and attempts to allow it to rejoin the Arab League.

In the Turkish capital, Ankara, the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies held a closed workshop, in cooperation with the Foreign Policy Institute in Ankara, entitled “The Turkish role in the conflict in Syria and its future,” on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, in which twenty Turkish experts, including former ambassadors, academics, politicians and researchers, along with ten Syrian experts discussed several issues related to Turkey’s role in Syria, and Turkey’s relations with various parties in the Syrian conflict. The role of Turkey in facilitating a political solution in Syria in accordance with UN resolutions was also discussed.

In a statement on February 9, the Syrian Negotiating Committee announced its rejection of the UN envoy’s “step-for-step” plan, and any initiatives or mechanisms that do not practically lead to the implementation of UN Resolution 2254, aimed at achieving a political transition in Syria.

Regarding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, on February 28, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) held a special meeting to discuss the invasion and its impact on the Syrian issue. It was argued that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been no different to its actions in Syria since 2015, where Russian forces have targeted hospitals, markets and residential areas, in an attempt to impose a military solution on the country. As a result, the SNC called on the international community to pressure Russia to stop its aggression against Syria and Ukraine, stressing the need to adopt a clear and deterrent policy that underlines international opposition to acts of aggression that target the sovereignty and stability of states and threaten international peace and security. The SNC also called on the UN General Assembly to activate its resolution on Uniting for Peace.

In the opposition-controlled areas inside Syria, the Syrian Interim Government, affiliated with the National Coalition, welcomed the report published by the OPCW which clearly demonstrates that the Syrian regime used chlorine gas in the bombing of a field hospital in the town of Kafr Zita, in the Hama governorate in 2016.

Inside Syria, in areas under the control of the Syrian regime, on February 14, three opposition parties signed an initiative which called on all Syrian political parties to conduct a critical review and evaluate their previous performance over the past ten years, and to unify their efforts in order to achieve a political transition. The three signatories were the Syrian National Conference to Restore Sovereignty and Decision, the National Coordination Body - Movement for Democratic Change, and the National Initiative in Jabal al-Arab.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine launched a wave of discussion and activities among Syrian opposition groups, and there were different opinions about the effects the invasion will have on the Syrian issue. Most groups came to the conclusion that Syria will be greatly affected by the invasion and its results will have important repercussions for Syria.

Many parties from the Syrian opposition see Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an opportunity to shed light on the Syrian issue internationally, especially with countries like the United States. The invasion makes international officials more willing to take notice of the Syrian issue, despite their preoccupation with Ukraine, and introduces international public opinion to Russia's crimes in Syria and to the crimes committed by the Syrian regime, all of which prompt external actors to exert more pressure on Russia to end its involvement in Syria. However, the absence of a unified political opposition hampers the opposition's activities and limits their spatial and temporal impact.

## **The Autonomous Administration / Militia (SDF)**

As part of its quest to solely manage the areas under its control, the Autonomous Administration, which is dominated by Kurdish militias, ended the sessions of the expanded committee to draft the Social Contract Charter at the third annual meeting of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which was held in the city of Raqqa, on the 6 and 7 February.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by Kurdish Democratic Union Party militia fighters and which controls areas in northern and eastern Syria, continued its practices of pursuing opponents and media professionals, recruiting young people into its ranks, harassing civilians, and imposing restrictions on displaced people from neighboring areas. This led to residents of several areas, including Al-Busira, east of Deir Ez-Zor, to go out on demonstrations rejecting the actions of SDF forces against the civilian population. Protesters blocked roads with burning tyres and tens of people gathered from the town of Azbe, North-East of Deir-Ez-Zor to demand the distribution of fuel to civilians, and to protest against corruption in the Self-Administration institutions in the north and east of Syria.

As part of its attempts to impose restrictions on media professionals, the Autonomous Administration suspended the work of the Rudaw media network in areas of its control, while a number of media professionals were arrested by the PYD militia.

On the political level, a statement issued by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria on February 18 welcomed Russian support for Kurdish participation in the Syrian Constitutional Committee, despite the fact that the Kurds are already representatives and participants, through the Kurdish National Council, in the National Coalition, the Negotiations Committee and the Constitutional Committee.

In response to Kurdish militias' monopolizing the management of Kurdish political affairs, Bashar Amin, a leader in the Kurdish National Council in Syria, claimed in a press statement that facts on the ground indicate the end of the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue on the part of the Democratic Union Party and the parties supporting it.

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