

Monitoring Report for Political Developments in Syria

May 2022



مركز حرمون
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Harmoon Center
For Contemporary Studies

Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies

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Executive Summary of Political Developments

The most significant political development in May was Bashar al-Assad's visit to Iran, which was proof of the failed bet by some Arab states on the possibility of disengaging the Syrian regime from its Iranian ally as a reward for normalizing relations with the regime.

On May 23, the Turkish President announced his country's intention to launch a military operation in northern Syria to further the establishment of a safe zone 30 km within the Syrian border. The announcements triggered various reactions by the international community.

The Syrian opposition is still ineffective. Its activities largely consist of media statements and internal reforms of opposition institutions which have failed to inspire the confidence of Syrian citizens.

In May, the United States was active on the Syrian issue on a number of different fronts. The American ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas Greenfield, visited the Bab al-Hawa crossing in northern Syria, where she issued a statement to confirm that UN aid would continue to cross the border, despite Russia's attempts to hinder the implementation of the renewed Security Council resolution on the mechanism for delivering aid through the crossing.

Despite warnings by UN officials about the difficult conditions Syrians are facing, no action has been taken by the international community to alleviate their suffering. Instead, a statement was issued by the UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, praising the Syrian regime for an amnesty, even though only a few hundred prisoners have actually been released from prison. Most of those released are in poor health as a result of years being held in poor conditions, simply for participating in demonstrations calling for change. Hundreds of thousands continue to be detained by the regime, with no information about their whereabouts, or the conditions of their detention. On May 30, the eighth round of meetings in the Constitutional Committee was launched by Pedersen, which proved to be just as unproductive as the previous rounds, due to the regime's intransigence.

As for the Syrian regime's allies, Russia and Iran, there were no developments in their political activity in May other than attempts by the Russian Foreign Minister to persuade the Sultanate of Oman to play a role in reintegrating the Syrian regime in the Arab arena.

Insofar as Arab states are concerned, in May, Jordan repeated its warning that Iran's subversive influence was escalating in southern Syria after most of the Russian forces there had withdrawn. There were no steps taken towards normalizing relations with the Syrian regime by any Arab state.

The Sixth Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, organized by the European Union was held on the 9 May, and included those countries active in Syria, neighboring states, the UN and various other community organizations. Russia, however, was excluded from participating in the conference. The European Union reiterated its refusal to normalize relations with the Syrian regime or to lift sanctions imposed against it, while those countries attending the conference pledged to provide about 6.4 billion euros to support the needs of the Syrian people.

Several political developments occurred during May. This report reviews the most significant of them.

American Policy

The US administration was active on the Syrian issue on a number of different fronts. In a statement earlier this month, the US State Department condemned the atrocities featured in a leaked video of the Tadamon massacre, published by the British newspaper, The Guardian. The video shows scenes of the unlawful execution of civilians who were blindfolded and unarmed. The US statement suggests that the video provides further evidence of war crimes committed by the regime, and is another horrific example of the atrocities that the Syrian people have suffered for more than a decade.

After a presidential amnesty decree was issued in Syria, which led to the release of hundreds of detainees, a US State Department spokesman said that the Syrian regime was "still responsible and accountable for the death and suffering of countless Syrians, and the displacement of more than half of the country's population before the war, and the arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance of more than 130,000 men, women and children." The US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas Greenfield, stated that Al-Assad regime should not be given "the right to normalize its relations with the international community," stressing that the regime still "detains the Syrian people as hostages."

On May 9, US President, Joe Biden, signed an executive order extending the state of "national emergency" in response to "the measures of the Syrian re-

gime” for another year, stressing that these measures constitute an “extraordinary threat” to the United States.

At the end of April, the Director of Lebanese Public Security, Major General Abbas Ibrahim, who is considered to be close to the Syrian regime and the Hezbollah militia, made renewed attempts to release the American photojournalist Austin Tice, who has been detained by the Syrian regime for almost ten years. In a meeting with the US President in Washington, Ibrahim met Austin Tice’s parents, and reiterated his commitment to continue efforts at all levels to ensure that the kidnapped journalist is returned safely to his family.

On May 8, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas Greenfield, visited north Syria, and held a meeting with representatives from Syrian civil society and humanitarian organizations that work inside Syria or help Syrian refugees and the communities hosting them. Greenfield declared at the Bab al-Hawa crossing that Washington would continue to deliver aid to northern Syria, even if Russia tried to impede the UN mechanism for the entry of aid through the crossing. She also stressed that the return of Syrian refugees to their country must take place on the basis of a safe, dignified and voluntary return, and that these conditions were at present “actually not available.”

With regards to the Caesar Act sanctions, Washington announced that foreign investment in some areas of northern Syria would be permitted, and that these areas would be exempt from the Caesar Law sanctions, which Washington currently imposes on the Syrian regime. US sanctions were also imposed on five wealthy businessmen who operate in Indonesia, Syria and Turkey, and are supporters of the regime in Syria.

US officials confirmed Washington’s official position rejecting Turkey’s proposal to launch a military operation against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia in northern Syria. The US State Department announced that it was in contact with the Turkish government regarding the possible military operation, and the US State Department spokesman, Ned Price, said that a new attack in northern Syria would undermine regional stability and obstruct the campaign against ISIS.

The former US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, warned of an escalation of tensions in Syria, as Iran continues to expand its militias in the south and east of the country, filling the gap left by the partial withdrawal of Russian forces, and with Israel’s intensification of air strikes on Iranian targets inside Syria.

On a different note, the US pledged to donate a new humanitarian aid package worth \$800 million for the benefit of the Syrian people at the Brussels Conference to Support the Future of Syria.

Russia

After months of being preoccupied with the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has revived its efforts to bring the Al-Assad regime out of international isolation. On a visit to the Sultanate of Oman on May 11, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, called on the Sultanate of Oman to “contribute effectively to the return of the Syrian regime to the League of Arab States.” During the visit, Lavrov and Omani officials discussed issues related to Syria, Iran, Ukraine, and the energy crisis. In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its discontent at the exclusion of Moscow and Damascus from the conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region in its sixth session held in the Belgian capital, Brussels, and dubbed the conference as a gathering for a “crowd” of Westerners that carries no added value.

In Moscow, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Representative of the Russian President for the Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, met the Syrian Ambassador to Moscow, Riad Haddad, at the request of the latter, on May 6. The talks revolved around developments in Syria and the expected Astana meeting in the Kazakh capital, Nur-Sultan, in June.

Celebrations were held by the Russian Reconciliation Center in the cities of Daraa and As-Suwayda in southern Syria, in commemoration of Russia’s victory over Nazism in World War II, with the participation of representatives of the center in Hmeimim.

In May, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, made a statement about his country’s efforts to persuade Turkey to reopen its airspace to Russian planes transporting soldiers to and from Syria.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry accused Russia of stealing grain from the areas of its control in Ukraine, and of transporting the grain to Syria on ships carrying the Russian flag.

The Arab Position

No visits by any Arab officials to Damascus were recorded in May, and the Syrian regime's communication with Arab countries was limited to official congratulatory messages to four countries, the UAE, Algeria, the Palestinian Authority and Sudan on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr.

In Jordan, there were warnings from the Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah II, that Iran and its "proxies" would fill the vacuum left by Russia in southern Syria, resulting in an escalation of potential problems on Jordan's borders. These warnings came at a time when the Jordanian army stated that its forces are already confronting Iranian organizations on the Syrian-Jordanian border that have foreign agendas and target Jordanian national security. The Jordanian Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi, called for a political solution in Syria, with Arab states playing a clear role.

In a statement that angered many Syrian opposition activists, the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, expressed its hope for "positive changes" in the future, regarding the resumption of its relations with the Syrian regime following a visit by a delegation of its senior leaders to Moscow on May 4. The statement came in conjunction with the announcement by the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria that 101 Palestinian refugees have been "field-executed" by Syrian security services in the period since the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011 until April this year.

At the Sixth Brussels Conference to Support the Future of Syria and the Region, the Assistant Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Hossam Zaki, called on the international community to continue efforts to confront the crisis of displaced Syrians and refugees, despite the difficult global conditions resulting from the war in Ukraine. The Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdallah Bou Habib, invited the Syrian regime for negotiations to discuss the return of refugees, given that the situation in Lebanon is only likely to worsen if Syrians do not return to their country.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah and the Syrian regime received a blow in the Lebanese parliamentary elections, after the party and its allies lost their majority in Parliament, and opposition figures gained seats. In an interview with "TV Syria," the former Lebanese Minister of Justice, Major General Ashraf Rifi, accused the Lebanese Hezbollah militia of displacing Syrian people from villages on Lebanon-Syria border, stressing that Hezbollah came armed with weapons to fight the Syrian people, and has committed crimes against Syrians.

The United Nations

In May, the United Nations issued a number of statements concerning the conditions of Syrian detainees held in the regime's prisons, and the difficult conditions faced by Syrians, both inside Syria and in the countries where they have claimed asylum. However, no serious action has been taken by the UN. This reflects years of inactivity by the international community on the Syrian issue.

On May 25, in response to the announcement by the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, that Turkey would soon launch new military operations in northern Syria, the United Nations confirmed its previous position defending the integrity and unity of Syrian territory, stressing that Syria "does not need more military operations."

The UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, held several meetings with officials from the Syrian opposition, the Syrian regime and the countries active on the Syrian issue, ahead of the eighth round of the meetings of the Syrian Constitutional Committee on the 31 May. The committee, has yet to achieve any progress due to the regime's intransigence, and its lack of seriousness in discussing the topics set on the agenda.

Earlier, on May 10, Pedersen confirmed that a political solution in Syria was still a long way off, and expressed his hopes for positive progress in the meeting of the Constitutional Committee, and praised the amnesty, issued by the Syrian President on April 30, stating that it has "positive possibilities."

In response to the Syrian regime's release of a few hundred detainees, based on the presidential amnesty, the head of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Paulo Pinheiro, claimed that the Syrian regime has executed thousands of detainees in prison, stressing that most detainees were subjected to torture. These comments came during a conference held on the fate of detainees in the Syrian regime prisons on 7 May.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, demanded to be given a list of the Syrian regime prisons, and to achieve greater accountability for violations and crimes committed in Syria.

Commenting on the amnesty decree, Human Rights Watch said that "even when the Syrian regime provides a little good news, it continues to punish those living under its authoritarian rule," stressing that the families of the Syrian detainees "deserve answers."

In response to the difficult conditions faced by Syrians, in May, officials from various international organizations and agencies issued statements to express their concern. The UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Adele Khodor, warned, for example, that “more than 6.5 million children in Syria need assistance,” and that this was “the highest number recorded in more than 11 years.” The United Nations World Food Program renewed its warning of a “worrying” scenario for food security in Syria, and called on the Director of the World Health Organization for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, to strengthen the provision of health care in Syria. He described the needs of the Syrians as enormous, and conditions as being harsh.

These statements came at a time when the number of UN aid convoys to northern Syria have significantly decreased, with only 14 relief trucks entering the country on the 16 May from regime-controlled areas into Aleppo, north-western Syria, through the Al-Tarnaba crossing, east of Idlib. The Response Coordinators team condemned the entry of aid “through the lines,” in view of the fact that this aid cannot be considered as a substitute for the cross-border aid that usually enters Syria from the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reduced the amount of water it is pumping to the Rukban camp for the displaced, located on the Syrian-Jordanian border. The camp has been subjected to a year-long siege by the regime and Russia.

Amnesty International confirmed in a statement that the decline in international aid to northwest Syria has caused a health crisis, with hospitals and other medical facilities operating with only limited resources. The Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross warned of “the collapse of basic public services in Syria” as global attention shifts to other crises, leaving millions of Syrians at risk of falling into “poverty and despair.”

Some international organizations operating in the Al-Hol camp, which is under SDF control in northeastern Syria, suspended their work after unidentified masked men kidnapped an employee from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRS) on the 9 May.

The European Union

The European Union renewed its refusal to lift sanctions imposed against the Syrian regime, and stressed that it would continue to provide the Syrian people with their needs, without participating in the reconstruction process.

On May 9, the European Union organized the Sixth Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region, in which the United Nations, the United States, various country actors, and neighboring states involved in the Syrian issue, together with civil society groups and other governmental and international organizations, participated. Russia was excluded from attending the conference.

The participating countries pledged to provide approximately 6.4 billion euros for 2022 and beyond, in order to support the Syrian people in 2022 and 2023. The participants also stressed that they would not finance reconstruction in Syria before a political solution had been reached, which was confirmed by Head of the European Union delegation to Syria, Dan Stoinescu, in a statement made on the sidelines of the conference.

The High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, Josep Borrell, stated that 90% of Syrians live in poverty, and 60 percent lack food security. Borrell ruled out normalizing relations with the Syrian regime, or launching a program for the reconstruction of Syria, noting that any money “spent for the reconstruction of Syria” would inevitably “go to support the regime.”

On May 30, the European Union announced the extension of sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime for an additional year. The leader of the Guardians of Religion, Farouk al-Suri and the movement’s religious leader, Sami al-Uraydi, were added to the list of sanctioned individuals, with the group itself proscribed as a terrorist organization. This was despite a reduction in the organization’s strength in northwestern Syria at the hands of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham last year.

On a different note, in a ruling dated May 18, the Paris Court of Appeal convicted the French cement company Lafarge of complicity in crimes against humanity in Syria. The company was accused after its Syrian branch had paid millions of dollars and traded in raw materials with ISIS and other armed groups in Syria.

Iran

The visit of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, to Iran, on May 8, and his meeting with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, was the most significant event during this month, reaffirming the deep alliance between the two states. Media reports spoke of a “repositioning” of Iran and its militias in Syria after the partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria. The visit confirmed the failure of some Arab countries which had hedged their bets on the possibility of disengaging the Syrian regime from its Iranian ally, in exchange for normalization with the regime.

Turkey

The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s announcement of his country’s intention to launch a military operation to complete the establishment of a safe zone 30 kilometers along the southern border with Syria was a significant event that provoked a response at the international and local level.

Erdogan’s statement came on May 23, as Turkish forces escalated operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in areas of its control in northeastern Syria, following an attack by the militia on the Turkish army.

Erdogan’s announcement also coincided with increased pressure from the opposition on the Turkish government regarding the issue of Syrian refugees. In response to increased pressure, on May 3, Erdogan announced of the launch of a project to build homes for Syrians in the north, allowing one million Syrian refugees, hosted by Turkey, to return to their country.

The announcement of the Turkish military operation also came after Washington’s decision to exempt Kurdish militia-controlled areas from Caesar Law sanctions, which Turkey rejected. In confirmation of the potential military operation, on May 25, the Turkish National Security Council granted a mandate to the President to begin the operation in northern Syria.

With Turkey’s intention to return one million Syrian refugees, and the announcement by the Turkish president that his country would not expel any Syrians who had sought refuge in Turkey to escape the war in their country, on May 3, the Turkish Minister of Interior, Suleiman Soylu, visited the city of Sarmada on the border with Turkey, where he opened a residential village, built by the Turkish Emergency and Disasters Administration (AFAD).

Soylu confirmed that the number of houses that Turkey is building in Idlib would reach 100,000 before the end of 2022. In subsequent statements, he also confirmed that Syrians had contributed to an increase in production in Turkey, with a recent \$3 billion increase in exports.

Ismail Catakli, a spokesman for the Turkish Ministry of Interior, said that the number of Syrians who received Kamlik, or temporary protection, had not changed much since 2017, noting that the issue of migration had been exploited by some parties recently, which had attempted to falsify official data.

Israel

Despite the increase in the number of Israeli attacks inside Syria, intensifying in their frequency and scope, the Israeli government was keen to stress that it was not targeting the Syrian regime. The Israeli leadership has relayed frequent messages stressing that its military operations in Syria are not directed against Bashar al-Assad, but rather against the Iranian presence in Syria. This accounts for the failure of the Syrian regime to respond to the dozens of Israeli attacks.

On May 3, the Israeli Defense Minister, Benny Gantz, confirmed in statements to the media that his government “continues to secretly coordinate with Russia regarding Israeli air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria,” and that “coordination is in place, even after Israel had sent limited military aid to Ukraine.”

The Syrian Regime

Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Iran on 8 May confirmed that Iran is indispensable to the Syrian regime and one of its most reliable allies, especially after the partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria to the war in Ukraine. The visit by the Syrian President also demonstrated the failure of Arab states which had banked on removing the regime from the Iranian axis in return for normalization with the regime and Syria’s reintegration into the international community.

On the 9 May, Bashar al-Assad met the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on what was a rare visit by an official from an international organization to Syria. In a further attempt to break out of its international isolation, on May 16, Bashar received members of the General Secretariat of the Union of Palestinian Com-

munities and Institutions, during the Fifth General Conference of the Union, which was held in Damascus, exploiting the Palestinian cause to attract greater support for the Syrian regime.

The exclusion of the Syrian regime and Russia from the Brussels Conference, organized by the European Union, sparked condemnation from the regime, and prompted the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to denounce the conference, declaring it “inconsistent with the principles of the United Nations regulating humanitarian action.” The Syrian ministry indicated that the conference had “intentionally politicized the issue of humanitarian aid.”

The Syrian regime also condemned the US administration’s decision to exempt northern Syria from the Caesar Act sanctions.

On May 20, the Syrian regime’s Foreign Ministry announced that it had rejected Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s statements about the return of one million Syrian refugees to the “safe areas” in northern Syria. Further, the Syrian ambassador to Russia, Riad Haddad, said that the regime did not see any prospects for starting a dialogue with Turkey, with the aim of resolving differences and disputes between the two parties.

According to the BasNews website, which is close to the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, a delegation from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) met the director of the National Security Office from the Syrian regime, Major General Ali Mamlouk in Damascus, to discuss the situation in northeastern Syria.

Syrian Opposition

The decision of the National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces to dismiss a number of its members, and the appointment by its political body of Badr al-Jamous as the head of the negotiating committee, replacing Anas al-Abdah on May 25, provoked negative reactions from across the Syrian opposition community.

On the political front, the coalition called for the UN to “override the veto of Russia and China,” which has been used over the past few years in favor of the Syrian regime, to prevent the regime from being held accountable for the bloodshed caused in Syria. The coalition also stressed the need for humanitarian aid to reach Syrians located far from the regime and its institutions, and called for an extension of the mechanism for delivering aid across the border.

In a statement by the coalition, the amnesty decree issued by the Syrian regime was declared to be nothing but a falsehood initiated by the regime to cover up the Tadamon massacre. The coalition called on the United Nations to take immediate action and to work seriously in order to release detainees and find out information about their fate.

With regards to the activities of Syrian civil society organizations, on May 11, seventeen Syrian organizations working in human rights, civil society, and the humanitarian field sent a letter to the US delegate to the Security Council, Linda Thomas Greenfield, as President of the current session of the Security Council, calling for an independent investigation into the Tadamon massacre, committed by members of Branch 227 of the Syrian Regime's Military Intelligence.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the Syrian regime's release of 527 people, after the recent presidential amnesty for terrorist crimes. In a report on May 27, the organization noted that among those released were 59 women, and 16 individuals who were children at the time of their arrest. The report also revealed that the regime is still holding about 132,000 detainees who have been held in prison since the start of the protests in Syria in 2011. According to the report, among those released were 131 people who were supposed to have had their security status "settled" prior to their arrest, and 21 others, including two women, who were arrested after their return to Syria from asylum abroad.

The Autonomous Administration / SDF Militia

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia, which is dominated by militia fighters from the Kurdish People's Protection Units, continued its repressive policies against civilians in its areas of control. The Turkish President's announcement of his country's intention to launch a military operation in northern Syria, increased violations carried out by the SDF militia, which stepped up its policy of forced recruitment of young men into its ranks.

Despite the continuous support provided by the coalition forces, of which the American forces constitute the main component, the Syrian Democratic Council, the political arm of the SDF militia in northeastern Syria, accused the international coalition, led by the US, of preventing any military operation launched by Turkey in northern Syria.

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