



Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Syria – January to June 2022

01 July 2022

03 January 2022

Latakia: suspected Israeli attack on port

Syrian media reported an overnight bombardment on the country's main port in Latakia on 28.12.21. According to the report, the missiles, which were reportedly fired over the eastern Mediterranean, hit the container terminal and started a fire that also damaged several adjacent buildings. There are no reports of casualties or deaths.

A similar, albeit less serious, attack on the same terminal had already been carried out on 07.12.21. An anonymous source, said to be familiar with the port's operations, told an international news agency that large quantities of Iranian arms shipments were said to have been stored in the terminal in question.

Idlib: air strike hits water supply pipelines

According to media reports, Russian warplanes dropped bombs over Idlib Governorate on 02.01.22, some of which hit a water pumping station in the capital of Idlib. A representative of the local water utility service reported that the pumping station was out of action as a result of the damage. A UN official confirmed the destruction of the plant and warned against attacks on civilian infrastructure.

Israel: plans to double population on the Golan Heights

Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announced on 27.12.21 an infrastructure programme aimed at doubling the Israeli population in the Golan Heights. The disputed territory first came under Israeli control in the so-called Six-Day War of 1967 and was eventually annexed in 1981. The annexation was recognised by the US in 2019, the only other country in the world to do so. The international community, however, still considers the Golan Heights to be part of Syria. The Syrian government has rejected the new plans.

Approximately 50,000 people live on the territory spanning around 1,200 square metres, half of them consisting of Jewish Israelis and the other half of Arab Druze, who used to belong to Syria and of whom only a small number have so far taken Israeli citizenship.

Bahrain reappoints ambassador to Damascus

The Gulf state appointed its first ambassador to Syria in more than a decade on 30.12.21. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Bahrain was one of the states supporting the armed opposition in Syria. The embassy in Damascus had already been reopened in 2018.

10 January 2022

Central Syria: at least five people killed in attack on military transport bus

The state news agency SANA reported that an attack had taken place on a highway through central Syria near the ancient oasis city of Palmyra on 03.01.22. Five soldiers were killed and 20 others were injured in the attack, it said.

According to the report, armed militants first fired rockets at the bus and then followed it with gunfire from an anti-aircraft gun. A government spokesperson has blamed ISIS for the attack. The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also reported on the attack carried out by suspected ISIS fighters but said that at least nine soldiers had been killed. According to the report, members of militias loyal to the government were also among the soldiers.

17 January 2022

Anwar Raslan convicted in Germany

In the world's first trial on state torture in Syria, Anwar Raslan, a former colonel in the Syrian intelligence service, was convicted of crimes against humanity in Koblenz on 13.01.22. The Higher Regional Court considered it proven that Raslan, who at the time supervised the notorious al-Khatib unit in Damascus, oversaw torture, sexual assault up to and including rape of prison inmates, as well as the murder of at least 27 people in custody. Court proceedings on human rights violations in Syria have so far only been conducted in Germany against perpetrators at lower levels of the command structures or against higher-ranking persons, who, however, could only be charged in absentia. An investigation of crimes under international law in Syria by the International Criminal Court in The Hague failed due to the veto of the permanent UN Security Council members Russia and China. Observers voiced concern that the verdict could potentially deter other perpetrators from defecting and coming to Europe, as Raslan did. Others see the court ruling as an exemplary trial that may go a long way towards documenting and shedding light on the Syrian war and torture apparatus.

Gunfire at the border: Jordanian officer killed

According to a statement issued by the Jordanian military, an officer was killed and three other troops were injured on 16.01.22 when drug smugglers from Syria tried to cross the border. The perpetrators are said to have fled back to Syria, leaving their contraband behind. According to UN experts, Syria has become the main production centre for narcotics destined for markets in Jordan, Iraq, the Gulf States and Europe.

Azaz, al-Bab, Afrin: at least three people killed in suicide attacks

Several explosions occurred in the Turkish-occupied north-west of the country on 13.01.22. After an explosive device detonated in Azaz, killing one civilian, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive waistcoat a few hours later at a marketplace in al-Bab, according to local police reports. This was followed by another suicide bombing at a roundabout in Afrin minutes later, the report says.

24 January 2022

North-east: coordinated attack on prison detaining ISIS fighters

In the early hours of 20.01.22, a large number of fighters attacked the Gweiran detention centre in Hasakah, where thousands of suspected jihadists are being held. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on the ground say this is the largest attack carried out by ISIS militia since the so-called caliphate was defeated militarily about three years ago. According to the SDF, the attackers first detonated a car bomb at the entrance of the prison and then opened fire on the security forces. Dozens of people, including members of the security forces, ISIS fighters and civilians, were killed in the ensuing fighting which spread to the surrounding neighbourhood. By the evening of 21.01.22, the attackers still had about a quarter of the prison under their control. A statement issued by the SDF reported that the remaining attackers entrenched in the prison had taken to using more than 600 underage boys who were in the prison's rehabilitation wing as human shields, making it difficult for the SDF to recapture it. ISIS also released a video in which more than a dozen people from the civilian prison staff were paraded as hostages. On 23.01.22, US attack helicopters flew attacks on the prison, killing an unknown number of assailants and/or inmates. It has not been possible to fully recapture the prison to date. Some prison inmates reportedly managed to escape during the fighting which lasted several days. It could not be confirmed how many people were taken back into custody immediately after escaping. Parallel to the attack in Hasakah, a similar attack occurred in the Iraqi province of Diyala. According to Iraqi media reports, several dozen escaped prison inmates from Syria were arrested while trying to cross the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Afrin: at least four people killed in missile attack

According to first responders and medical teams on the ground, a missile strike on the outskirts of Turkish-occupied Afrin on 20.01.22 killed at least four people and injured more than a dozen others. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack. The Turkish military subsequently opened fire on SDF positions.

Idlib: cold snap and snowstorm claim lives in refugee camps

A UN spokesperson announced on 20.01.22 that at least one child had died in a refugee camp in Qastal Miqdad when the tent he was in collapsed under masses of snow. The mother of the child is reportedly in intensive care. According to the UN spokesperson, two other children were also hospitalised suffering from hypothermia. According to the UN, more than 400 families have been affected by the snowstorm. Abraz camp further north had to be evacuated.

31 January 2022

Hasakah: hundreds killed in recapture of prison

After intense fighting with ISIS militants (cf. BN of 24.01.22), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced on 30.01.22 that they had completely resealed control of al-Sinaa prison in the Ghwayran neighbourhood of Hasakah. US forces, who were also involved in the fighting and for whom it has been the heaviest fighting in Iraq and Syria since the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, confirmed this account.

There was initially no comment on the fate of the detained underage boys who had temporarily been held hostage. The prison housed more than 3,000 suspected ISIS supporters and about 700 minors. According to the SDF statement, at least 200 prison inmates and attackers as well as 30 members of the security forces were killed in the clashes. About 45,000 people had to leave their homes in neighbouring residential areas. International journalists on the ground reported how SDF fighters had to remove dozens of bodies in trucks. All shops in Hasakah have had to remain closed since the fighting broke out on 20.01.22.

Smugglers killed at Jordanian-Syrian border

The Jordanian military says it killed 27 suspected smugglers on the border with Syria on 27.01.22 who were attempting to cross the border clandestinely and seized large quantities of narcotics in this and other operations. Other persons had been wounded and had fled back to Syria. There have previously been clashes in connection with smugglers from Syria in which Jordanian soldiers have been killed (cf. BN of 17.01.22).

07 February 2022

Northwest: ISIS leader dies in US special forces operation

The ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi was killed on 03.02.22 during a special forces operation carried out by the U.S. army in Atmeh, a small town between the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib, close to the Turkish border in north-western Syria. The U.S. army reportedly deployed two dozen special forces, helicopter gunships, combat drones and attack jets. During the operation, according to U.S. reports, ten civilians, including eight minors, were successfully evacuated from the ground floor of the house where al-Qurayshi was hiding. As the raid unfolded, the target, who was on the third floor, reportedly detonated an explosive device, ending his own life as well as that of his immediate family members. Rescue workers on the scene stated after the operation that at least 13 people had been killed, including women and children.

Al-Qurayshi's real name was Amir Muhammad Said Abdel-Rahman al-Mawla. The nom de guerre "al-Qurayshi" is often chosen in reference to the historical Quraysh family, to which the Prophet Mohammed also belonged. The later rulers of the Islamic dynasties (caliphates) also claimed the name to justify their actual or supposed descent from the Quraysh family.

Al-Qurayshi, a native of Iraq, was declared ISIS leader in 2019 after his predecessor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a similar US army operation, also in north-western Syria. The U.S. had put a US\$10 million bounty on al-Qurayshi's head. He allegedly shared responsibility for the kidnappings, mass murder and human trafficking of the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq and masterminded several of ISIS global terrorist attacks. Until the fall of Saddam Hussein, al-Qurayshi served in the Iraqi army for a short time and then completed a master's degree in Islamic

studies. In 2008, he was held in U.S. custody for an unknown period of time after participating in kidnappings and targeted killings as an al-Qaeda member in Mosul, Iraq.

Close to 80 targets bombed by Turkish military in northern Syria and northern Iraq

The Turkish Defence Ministry announced on 02.02.22 that around 60 warplanes and drones had attacked positions held by the Kurdish PKK ((Kurdistan Workers' Party) and YPG (People's Defense Units) militias. The military operation was dubbed "Winter Eagle" ("kış kartalı") and reportedly targeted hideouts, ammunition depots and training camps in the Sinjar Mountains, the Karacak region in northern Iraq and the Derik region in northern Syria. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least four people were killed. Turkish combat drones reportedly also fired two missiles at a power station near the Syrian town of Malikiyah, killing not only the guards but also civilians. The Kurdish-led administration in north-eastern Syria has condemned the military operation and accused Turkey of deliberately timing it shortly after a major ISIS offensive.

Al-Bab: at least seven killed in artillery fire

At least seven people were killed and 29 injured in Turkish-occupied al-Bab in northern Syria on 02.02.22, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The attack was reportedly carried out by Kurdish militias from neighbouring areas.

14 February 2022

Idlib: six killed in artillery fire

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has close links to the opposition, several artillery shells fired by the Syrian army hit various locations west of the city of Aleppo on 12.02.22. One salvo also reached the village of Maarat an-Naasan in Idlib, killing a family of six.

The Syria Civil Defence, an opposition civil defence organisation (also known as the "White Helmets"), counted a total of 65 children killed by shelling in the past six months.

Suweida: protests against subsidy cuts

According to reports, a number of people gathered for peaceful protests in the predominantly Druze-inhabited town in the south of the country on 10.02.22. They were demonstrating against subsidy cuts, which had come into effect a week earlier, and complaining about a deteriorating economic situation.

Suweida was one of the areas under government control throughout the Syrian conflict. Protests against the government in Damascus rarely take place.

Al-Hol: failed kidnap attempt

A spokesperson for the Kurdish-led security forces on the ground confirmed on 07.02.22 that a violent confrontation had occurred at the detention centre for family members of ISIS fighters after female detainees attempted to overpower and abduct the female guards. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a ten-year-old child was killed and six women and children were injured in a firefight that subsequently ensued.

For 2021, SOHR documented a total of 89 victims of violent clashes in al-Hol, including two members of the security forces as well as 67 Iraqi and 20 Syrian detainees.

21 February 2022

Damascus: soldier killed in attack on military bus

According to state media reports, an explosive device attached to a military bus detonated on 15.02.22. One soldier was killed, and eleven others were wounded. The explosion occurred at rush hour near Umayyad Square, a major transport hub in the capital Damascus. So far no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Idlib: four killed in government attack on fuel market

According to the opposition-affiliated Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), four people were killed in shelling carried out by Syrian government forces on a company's fuel market in the Tirmanin area, in the north of Idlib governorate, on 16.02.22.

Sweida: increase in crime and lawlessness

According to media reports, crime continues to increase in Sweida governorate. Local media reported more than 29 people killed in various incidents in January 2022. The local population accuses the government of lacking authority to enforce laws and justice and even of supporting gangs loyal to the government that take advantage of the lawlessness that sometimes prevails.

As a sign of civil disobedience and as a protest against the poor economic situation, the lack of adequate state services and the government's reduction of subsidies for many families, the population in Sweida blocked main roads and closed official offices in February 2022.

28 February 2022

UN: number of people in need of assistance in Syria higher than ever before

The UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs presented the humanitarian needs facing Syria in 2022 at a UN Security Council meeting held on 25.02.22. These were published in an annual report (Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic) released on 22.02.22. According to the report, 14.6 million Syrians are in need of assistance, an increase of 9% from the previous year and 32% from 2020. It states that Syria is now among the top ten countries in the world most at risk of food shortages, and the economy continues to be in a slump. Families spend on average 50% more than they earn. As a result of the debt, children, especially girls, are increasingly being taken out of school, and child marriage is on the rise.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government announced on 24.02.22 that it would further cut government spending as the current international conflict with Russia was expected to lead to a significant increase in oil and wheat prices. According to the state news agency SANA, the government cabinet had decided to build up additional reserves of staple foodstuffs and to ration their distribution for a period of two months initially.

Three soldiers killed in Israeli airstrikes

According to Syrian state media reports, the Israeli military carried out several air strikes against military targets in Syria over two days. Near the town of Quneitra on 23.02.22, only material damage was reportedly caused, whereas on 24.02.22 near the capital Damascus, it is said that three soldiers were also killed.

07 March 2022

Palmyra: 13 killed in attack on military van

According to state media reports, a military convoy was attacked on 06.03.22 while travelling through the sparsely populated region around Palmyra, reportedly killing 13 military personnel, including several officers and injuring 18 others.

Damascus: Israeli air strike reportedly kills civilians

The Syrian Ministry of Defence announced that fighter jets from Israel had fired on military targets near Damascus on 07.03.22, reportedly killing two civilians. This information has not yet been confirmed.

According to the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, there were no reports of casualties. The attack was said to be the seventh since the beginning of the year and the first since the Russia attacked Ukraine. Israel depends on Moscow's support for military operations in Syria. According to media reports, the Israelis notify the Russian military leadership in Syria each time before attacks are flown in order to avoid accidents. In September 2018, a Russian plane was hit by Syrian anti-aircraft missiles. At the time, all 15 Russian soldiers on board were killed.

14 March 2022

UN Commission of Inquiry presents new Syria report

The Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria presented the Commission's latest report summarising developments in Syria from the second half of 2021 at a press conference held on 09.03.22.

According to the report, the conflict, far from coming to an end, has recently increased in intensity again. Arbitrary arrests and torture are still taking place. By the beginning of 2022, inflation in Syria had reached 140 %. The Ukraine

war is likely to have further negative consequences for Syria, as the country has always received a large amount of wheat imports from Ukraine and Russia. Western sanctions against the government in Damascus may have to be reconsidered in order to allow for more humanitarian aid.

The press conference also highlighted the Koblenz court ruling against a former colonel of the Syrian intelligence service on 13.01.22 as a contribution, albeit a small one, to accountability for human rights violations in Syria (see Decision Letter 02/2022).

Iranian retaliation for Israeli attack in Damascus

A spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry confirmed on 09.03.22 that two Revolutionary Guard officers had been killed in the Israeli air strike in Damascus (cf. BN of 07.03.22) and that the Iranian leadership intends to retaliate.

Syrian state media have so far reported only two other alleged civilian casualties. However, the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) identified them as Syrian fighters of an Iran-friendly militia. SOHR also reported that the two Iranians killed belonged to the so-called Quds Brigades, the elite unit of the Revolutionary Guards.

The Iranian attack carried out on the U.S. consulate in Erbil in northern Iraq on 13.03.22 was, the Iranians say, the retaliation announced by Iran for the incident in Syria on 07.03.22.

ISIS appoints new caliph

In an audio message broadcast on 10.03.22 that had been circulated on ISIS's social media, the organisation announced that it had a new leader. However, apart from the name, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, little information was shared about the person. With the news, ISIS also confirmed for the first time the death of their last caliph, who, like his predecessor, had died on 03.02.22 during a special operation carried out by U.S. forces in north-west Syria.

21 March 2022

Media report: mass graves could hold evidence of war crimes

The New York Times published an investigative report on mass graves in Syria on 16.03.2. In interviews conducted over the past few months, four Syrians reported on their work on or near secret mass graves operated by the Syrian security authorities. The locations described were subsequently backed up by satellite images suggesting that in several areas under government control, graves had been systematically dug, torture victims buried in them and the areas subsequently sealed off with fences. The report mentions Qutayfa in the north and Najha in the south of Damascus as places where mass graves are said to be located.

According to witness reports and human rights organisations, people tortured to death in detention in particular were made to disappear in this way. They say U.S. government estimates from last year suggest that at least 14,000 Syrians were killed in custody during the Syrian conflict, but the actual number is likely to be far higher. More than 130,000 people are already considered to be missing after disappearing in Syrian government detention centres. Evidence smuggled out of Syria by the military photographer "Caesar" back in 2013 alone proved that 6,000 people died in Syrian captivity.

Two of the men interviewed for the investigation are now living in Germany, one is living in Lebanon and one remains in Syria.

President Assad visits the UAE

In the first trip he has made to an Arab country since 2011, the Syrian ruler met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the Vice-President and Prime Minister who is also the ruler of Dubai, on 18.03.22.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Assad has made virtually no trips abroad, except to Russia and Iran, his two protecting powers.

Like other Arab states, the UAE was involved in the boycott of the Syrian government for a long time but reopened its embassy in Syria at the end of 2018. The reception in Abu Dhabi marks another milestone towards normalization and reintegration into the Arab community of states.

Thousands of Syrians work in the UAE and regularly transfer money to their relatives who remain in Syria.

28 February 2022

Meeting of the Constitutional Committee ends

On 25.03.22, another meeting of the UN-initiated Constitutional Committee, consisting of representatives of the government, the opposition and civil society, ended in Geneva. According to media reports, it was not possible to achieve any significant progress after five days of negotiations.

The meeting ended without any statements from the participating parties, and a UN press conference was cancelled. The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, addressed the UN Security Council and called on all parties to be serious and willing to compromise in order to move the process forward.

Challenging developments in food prices and availability

According to media reports, price increases in the food sector, brought about, among other things, by the Ukraine war and related supply shortages, are causing rising food insecurity among the Syrian population. 90% of Syrians had already been living below the poverty line before the outbreak of the war. Over 12 million people, more than half of the population, are estimated to have been previously food insecure. As early as February 2022, the UN Security Council estimated that more than 14.6 million people in Syria would be dependent on aid programmes in 2022.

04 April 2022

Al-Hol: At least three dead in prison riot

The authorities of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have informed about firefights between the security forces and an IS sleeper cell in the al-Hol detention centre on 29.03.22. The camp houses tens of thousands of women and children, apparently wives, widows, and children of IS members. The attackers reportedly targeted local security forces with firearms and explosives. At least three people were killed in the ensuing fighting. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that an IS fighter, a woman and a child were among the victims, and four women and six children were injured.

On 31.03.22, the German foreign ministry informed that ten women and 27 children had been brought to Germany from Roj, a similar camp in north-eastern Syria. Four of the women were taken into custody at Frankfurt airport upon arrival for membership in a foreign terrorist organisation.

According to the SDF, the failure to repatriate foreign nationals is one of the biggest obstacles to the closure of the camps. German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock has stated that the majority of German children whose mothers support repatriation to Germany have been brought to safety.

Think Tank: Lessons from the Battle of Raqqa

In a new report dated 31.03.22, RAND, a US think tank established to advise the US military, presented lessons learned from the military operation to retake Raqqa from IS in 2017. The report was commissioned by the Pentagon itself.

According to some estimates, more than 1,600 civilians were killed in US airstrikes on the Syrian city of Raqqa. RAND also notes that 60-80 percent of the city was reportedly uninhabitable after it was liberated from IS control in October 2017. A particular challenge to avoiding civilian casualties was apparently due to the fact that there were no US forces on the ground who would have been capable of providing more precise information on targets.

11 April 2022

Northeast: Artillery attack wounds US soldiers

Four members of the US military were lightly wounded in an attack by two volleys of artillery fire on a US base in Deir ez-Zor governorate on 07.04.22. These were the first attacks since January 2022 on the military camp, where several hundred forces are stationed. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the attacks were carried out from a position where Iranian-backed militias are said to be present.

Northwest: Four schoolchildren killed in attack

On 04.04.22, four pupils were killed on their way to school when government forces attacked the rebel-held town of Ma'ret al Na'san in the north-east of Idlib governorate. At the same time, Russian forces carried out air strikes in the south of Idlib governorate.

The pupils killed were in seventh, eighth and ninth grade and were fatally shot just 50 metres from the school, school officials report. In recent months, Ma'ret al Na'san has been targeted several times by both government attacks and Russian air strikes. Together with Turkish-backed forces, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, which exercises control in the area, has carried out retaliatory strikes against Syrian government positions. There has been no information on casualties so far.

02 May 2022

Deir ez-Zor: Seven people killed in attack

Media report that on 28.04.22, armed gunmen on motorbikes came to the house of a former spokesman of the Syrian Democratic Forces SDF and opened fire on the group inside, who had gathered for breaking the fast. IS later claimed responsibility for the attack, which took place near the village of Abu Khashab in the north of Deir ez-Zor governorate. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented seven dead and four injured.

New defence minister appointed

In a press release of 28.04.22, the state news agency SANA informed that President Assad had appointed Major General Ali Mahmoud Abbas as the new defence minister and deputy supreme commander of the armed forces. Abbas comes from a majority Sunni region of Syria and succeeds Lieutenant General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, an Alawite who had held the post since 2018.

At least four soldiers killed in Israeli air strike

The Syrian defence ministry confirmed on 27.04.22 that four members of the armed forces were killed by an Israeli missile attack near the capital Damascus on the same day. The opposition group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has reported that the attack targeted an ammunition depot and that at least five different positions were hit. According to the report, five members of the regular army and four other fighters from abroad were killed. The Israeli military has not commented on the events.

09 May 2022

Northern Syria: Turkey announces resettlement of additional 1 million people

During the inauguration ceremony of new residential units in northern Syria to house refugees from Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave a video address on 04.05.22 in which he announced the construction of more houses for one million Syrians. Already, tens of thousands of brick buildings have been erected in the areas in northern Syria where the Turkish military is present. The Turkish president said that more than 57,000 houses have been completed in Idlib governorate alone, housing more than 50,000 families.

According to official figures from Turkey, 500,000 Syrians have already returned to Syria from Turkey since 2016. However, UNHCR has documented only about 130,000 returnees for the same period. According to UN estimates, more than 5.7 million people have left Syria since 2011; about 3.7 million of them have fled to Turkey.

The Turkish repatriation programme is internationally controversial: various human rights organisations accuse the Turkish government of resettling people from Syria against their will, or at least under great economic pressure. The resettlement takes place in the areas with Turkish military presence in northern Syria, where, moreover, only a minority of the refugees had reportedly lived before.

Increasing deterioration of the supply situation due to lack of international aid payments

Rising global food prices are having a negative impact on the Syrian population. With more than 90 percent of the population living in poverty, families increasingly need to resort to coping strategies such as skipping meals or reducing portions, especially among adults, according to media reports. In particular, many IDPs in north-western Syria are dependent on food aid. In the areas of the last rebel stronghold controlled by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

(HTS) group, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), which is the largest player in the provision of food aid, has already had to cut monthly rations, as has been reported by the media.

In 2022, ten of Idlib's 50 hospitals as well as 12 primary health care centres lost funding, forcing them to close down, Amnesty International said in a report. Other health facilities were at risk of closure in the near future. Medical facilities in the north-western areas under the control of the HTS were relying entirely on funding from the international community to provide free health services and medication. Over the past ten months, international aid to the health sector dropped by more than 40 percent due to the overall reduction of international assistance to Syria, the AI report said.

16 May 2022

Northwest: Ten killed in attack on military transport

According to media reports, a military bus carrying pro-government paramilitaries was hit by a rocket on 13.05.22. The state news agency SANA and the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) unanimously reported ten people killed who were on board the bus. Nine others were reportedly injured. The incident took place in the west of Aleppo governorate, in the area bordering the rebel-controlled Idlib province.

It was one of the deadliest single incidents since the ceasefire agreement of March 2020 came into force. A few hours later, Russian warplanes shelled rebel positions.

State media: Five people killed in Israeli air strike in Hama

On 13.05.22, the state news agency SANA reported about an Israeli airstrike in Masyaf, a village in Hama governorate. Apparently, one civilian was among the five people killed. SOHR reported that at least eight rockets were fired at ammunition depots and Iranian militia positions. The attack also resulted in several fires.

According to SOHR, this was the twelfth Israeli airstrike this year. The Israeli military has not commented on the events.

USA approves investments in areas outside President Assad's control

On 12.05.22, the US treasury department announced that it would permit limited investments in and trade with areas in northern Syria despite sanctions in place. The activities permitted concern a total of 12 economic sectors, among them agriculture, construction, and finance. The purchase of petrol from the concerned areas by neighbouring states is also to be permitted. Imports into the USA will not be allowed.

The reason given for this step was that the danger of a resurgent IS needed to be countered with economic stabilisation. However, trade with and investments in areas under government control, will expressly not be permitted. On 13.05.22, the Syrian foreign ministry reacted with a statement calling the US measure a new conspiracy against Syria and vowed to "defeat" the move.

23 May 2022

First amnesty for terrorism crimes

On 30.04.22, on the occasion of the end of the fasting month, President Assad issued Decree No. 7, 2022, granting immunity from prosecution for terrorist crimes committed by Syrians before 30.04.22, except for those that led to the death of a human being.

This is the first amnesty decree since the beginning of the Syrian conflict referring to people accused of terrorism. Under the far-reaching anti-terror legislation, a broad concept of terrorism had been introduced in Syria, under which many (alleged) opponents of the government were arrested.

Following the decree of 30.04.22, several hundred inmates were reportedly released from prison. However, the names of those released were not made public. Neither did the Syrian authorities give comprehensive information on the number of people released: By way of example, it was announced on 05.05.22 that about 100 prisoners from Damascus and the surrounding area and about 40 from Daraa had been released. According to human rights organisations, more than 130,000 people have been arrested or are considered to have disappeared during the Syrian conflict.

In the weeks following the announcement of the decree, hundreds of people gathered daily at the Presidential Bridge, a central square in Damascus, to look for relatives who might be among those released.

Donors' conference in Brussels

At a new donors' conference in Brussels on 09. and 10.05.22, the international community donated a total of USD 6.7 billion. The money is designed to benefit both the Syrians who have remained in the country, but also Syrians who escaped to neighbouring countries. The UN target of 10.5 billion USD for 2022 was thus missed, as had also been the case in 2021.

Israeli air strike on Damascus

The Syrian defence ministry has informed that on 20.05.22, Israeli air strikes from the Golan Heights area killed three people and caused material damage. Shortly before, state television had reported that several missiles had been fired over the Damascus region.

No further details were given on casualties or property damage. The Israeli military, in line with its usual practice, has not commented on the accusations.

30 May 2022

Turkey threatens new military offensive

On 29.05.22, Turkish President Erdoğan repeated his statement that Turkey is still intending to expel the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) from northern Syria. Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian offshoot of the terrorist organisation PKK which since 1984 has been in a permanent conflict with Turkey, claiming tens of thousands of lives. At the same time, the YPG is also the driving force behind the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who have successfully fought IS in north-eastern Syria and receive support from the US and Europe.

Drug smuggling on the Syrian-Jordanian border

A spokesperson for the Jordanian military said on 23.05.22 that they were bracing for an escalation along the border with Syria, where pro-Iranian units of the Syrian army and militias were stepping up their efforts to smuggle large quantities of amphetamines into Jordan and beyond. On 22.05.22, four smugglers were killed, bringing to 40 the number of people killed in connection with the fight against drug smuggling since the beginning of the year, the spokesperson said. According to Jordanian sources, those killed were mainly nomads hired by militias in southern Syria loyal to Iran.

Jordan is both a destination and transit country for the amphetamine Captagon, which is produced cheaply in Syria and has large markets in the Gulf States and Europe. In the last five months alone, more than 20 million tablets were reportedly seized, compared to 14 million tablets in the same period last year.

The Jordanian spokesperson explained that the Syrian security forces were no genuine partner who could reliably control the borders. The Syrian government denies being involved in the drug business.

13 June 2022

Northern Syria: Drone attack in Tal Abyad leaves several people dead

Media report that on 01.06.22, a rocket was fired at the Turkish-occupied city of Tal Abyad in northern Syria, killing at least three people and injuring ten others. The attack occurred a few hours after Turkish President Erdoğan announced in a speech that the Turkish army would soon eliminate all "terrorists" from the towns of Manbij and Tal Rifaat, which are currently still controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). For several weeks, the Turkish government has been announcing a new military offensive in northern Syria (cf. BN of 30.05.22).

The SDF has denied responsibility for the attack on Tal Abyad. On 07.06.22, they also announced that in the event of another Turkish offensive, they would turn to the Syrian government in Damascus for military support.

Deir ez-Zor: Three people killed in attack on civilian transport bus

According to a state news report, militants attacked a bus near a remote locality in Deir ez-Zor governorate on 02.06.22. Three people were reportedly killed and 21 injured. No further details were released about the course of events or about claimants of responsibility for the attack.

Damascus: Airport operations completely suspended after Israeli air strikes

Syrian media reported that Damascus International Airport had to suspend all flights on 10.06.22 after the runway had suffered major damage. The private airline Sham Wings informed that all flights from Damascus would be diverted via Aleppo International Airport and that a free shuttle bus service would be provided to passengers between Damascus and Aleppo.

The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that both the northern runway of the airport and the air traffic control tower were damaged after an Israeli air strike destroyed three weapons depots on the airport grounds. The weapons depots were reportedly run by Iranian or Iranian-sponsored militia groups.

The airport's northern runway was the only one still in operation after the one located further south had been damaged by a similar incident last year.

20 June 2022

Ceasefire ends clashes among SNA

Rebel representatives from the Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria have reported clashes between various armed groups belonging to the same umbrella organisation, the Syrian National Army (SNA) on 19.06.22. At least eight people were apparently killed and scores injured in fighting among the factions near the Syrian-Turkish border town of al-Bab in Aleppo governorate. Among the conflict groups were reportedly the Failaq al-Sham, the Levant Front, Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. The SNA harbours different ideological currents, from Islamists to Syrian Arab nationalists, and is supported by the protecting power Turkey.

The dominant faction in neighbouring Idlib, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has responded to the unrest by briefly deploying their own fighters to the region under SNA control. Eventually, however, the fighting was settled after Turkey was able to mediate a truce among the conflicting factions.

Anti-IS coalition: High-ranking IS member arrested in Aleppo

In a statement on 16.07.22, the US-led anti-IS coalition informed that Hani Ahmed al-Kurdi, also known as Salim, was taken into custody during a special operation in northern Syria. He is said to be an experienced explosives expert and coordinator of attacks. Apparently, no civilians were harmed in the operation. According to the opposition-affiliated Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the arrest was preceded by exchanges of fire with armed fighters in the village of al-Humaira, about four kilometres from the Turkish border.

A Syrian National Army (SNA) spokesperson said that this was the first military operation of its kind carried out in the areas under SNA control.

27 June 2022

UNHCR: Approx. 800 Syrians in Turkey return home every week

A representative of the UN Refugee Agency told an international news agency on 21.06.22 that about 800 Syrian refugees leave Turkey every week, although conditions are not suitable for a large number of voluntary returnees. The current returnees, mostly singles, were heading for the areas of northern Syria under Turkish occupation. The UNHCR official added that most Syrians in Turkey had no plans to return to Syria in the foreseeable future. Turkey is currently hosting about 3.7 million Syrian refugees.

Raqqa: 13 killed in IS attack on transport bus

IS claimed responsibility on 21.06.22 for an attack during the previous day on a civilian bus on its way to Homs, in which 13 people were reportedly killed and three others injured. The attackers allegedly operated with rapid-fire rifles. According to a statement by the Syrian army, eleven of those killed were soldiers.

Hamas resumes relations with Syria

Two representatives of the radical Islamic Palestinian movement have confirmed to an international news agency that Hamas had resumed relations with Syria after breaking with President Assad during the violent crackdown on protests in Syria.

Damascus International Airport back in operation

After a complete suspension of air traffic following an Israeli air strike on 10.06.22 (cf. BN of 13.06.22), air traffic to and from Damascus was reopened on 23.06.22.

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Briefing Notes
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