



# Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Syria – July to December 2024

31 December 2024

## 01 July 2024

### **South: Two dead in Israeli airstrikes**

According to Syrian state media, two people were killed and one soldier wounded in alleged Israeli airstrikes on 26.06.24. It is not known whether the casualties were civilians or militiamen. The report says that the airstrikes were carried out from the Golan Heights in southern Syria.<sup>1</sup>

### **South: Armed clashes in Suweida**

In the governorate of Suweida, which is nominally under the control of the Syrian government, armed clashes erupted on 23.06.24 between government troops and local armed groups after various pro-government troops and militias set up a checkpoint at the northern access to Suweida city.

Tensions only eased two days later, after an agreement had been reached between government representatives and local civilian (religious) authorities, in consultation with the armed factions involved. The agreement provides that the checkpoint is to be converted into a regular military post that will not affect the freedom of movement of the civilian population. The establishment of the checkpoint had caused unrest among the population, because a report had recently circulated saying that the government had issued numerous arrest warrants and travel bans for participants in the anti-government protests that have been ongoing since August 2023 (cf. BN of 10.06.24).<sup>2</sup>

### **South: Armed clashes in Dar'a**

In the village of Inkhil in the Dar'a governorate, local armed groups and government troops clashed violently on 30.06.24 after the armed factions besieged and attacked buildings used by the Syrian government's security services. According to media reports, the siege was triggered by the detention of a former opposition figure who had been arrested several weeks ago despite entering into a so-called reconciliation agreement with the government and has been held in Damascus ever since. Similar clashes are said to have erupted in Jassim shortly afterwards, where the release of three detainees was demanded.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ministry of Health significantly increases costs for medical examinations and hospitalisation**

According to media reports of 27.06.24, the Syrian Ministry of Health announced significant price increases as part of a new medical fee schedule.

Accordingly, costs for visits to the doctor and hospitalisation will increase by up to 600%. Hospitals, medical centres and private clinics are bound by the new fees. Due to the poor economic situation in the country, medical treatment is reportedly becoming increasingly unaffordable for the population.<sup>4</sup>

**08 July 2024**

**Northwest: Protests after riots in Türkiye**

Following riots against Syrian refugees in Türkiye, protests broke out in northern areas of the Aleppo governorate on 01.07.24. According to media reports, protesters initially blocked the Bab al-Salama border crossing on the Turkish-Syrian border. Furthermore, armed clashes ensued between Turkish troops and unknown gunmen in the city of Afrin. Units of the Turkish riot police were deployed to north-west Syria to bring the situation under control. The military police of the local so-called Syrian Interim Government, which is close to Türkiye, announced the following day that four people had been killed in the fighting in Afrin. A North Press Agency media report, however, stated that five people had been killed and 40 wounded.

Most of the border crossings between the north-western areas and Türkiye, including the Bab al-Hawa, Jarabulus and Bab al-Salama crossings, were initially closed to Syrian nationals. The operation of the crossings between areas under the control of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and the areas under the control of the Islamist Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was also suspended for the time being.

According to media reports, the protests were followed by a temporary suspension of internet and electricity services, which were then gradually restored, although they started out at a lower level than before.<sup>5</sup>

**Syrian man died in custody after deportation from Lebanon**

The NGO Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported on 28.06.24 that a Syrian man who had been deported from Lebanon to Syria in April 2024 along with other refugees had been detained upon his return and handed over to Palestine branch number 235 of the military intelligence agency. After being transferred from a location in Damascus to the military intelligence unit in Deir ez-Zor, his family received no further information about his condition or whereabouts. On 25.06.24, they were informed that he had died in custody. His body was handed over to his relatives the following day. The report does not provide any specific information about the cause of death. However, because the deceased had previously been in good health, SNHR considers it highly probable that torture and medical neglect may have been the cause of death.

Since the beginning of 2024, SNHR has recorded the detention of at least 126 Syrian refugees who were returned from Lebanon. Including four children and three women.<sup>6</sup>

**Iraq: Deportation of Syrian nationals**

According to a report by HRW of 27.06.24, several Syrian individuals have been deported to Damascus and the north-eastern areas of Syria under Kurdish control, despite a ruling by the Iraqi Supreme Court in August 2023 prohibiting the deportation of Syrian nationals and despite the fact that the individuals concerned were in possession of valid residence documents or registered as asylum seekers with the UNHCR.

In March 2024, Iraq launched a campaign to expel foreign nationals without valid residence permits. In April 2024, the issuing of visas for Syrian nationals in the KR-I was suspended to limit the influx of foreign labour.

Around 280,000 Syrians are still living in Iraq, most of them in the KR-I.<sup>7</sup>

**22 July 2024**

**North-east: Increase in attacks by IS; general amnesty by AANES**

In a statement dated 16.07.24, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) spoke of an increasing number of attacks by IS against targets in Iraq and Syria. Between January and June 2024, the group claimed a total of 153 attacks in both countries. Should the figures continue to develop in line with this trend, the number of attacks is expected to double in 2024 compared to 2023. According to an anonymous source of the U.S. Department of Defence, the group staged a total of 121 attacks in Syria and Iraq in 2023. As the latest figures only relate to the attacks for which IS officially claimed responsibility, experts assume that the number of unreported cases is higher. A U.S. think tank specialised in the region cites data suggesting 551 attacks in Syria in the first half of 2024.

One day after the press release, the administration of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) issued a general amnesty that could benefit hundreds of Syrians who were imprisoned because of their positions in IS. The amnesty provides for life sentences to be commuted to 15 years. People who have been sentenced to life imprisonment and suffer from incurable diseases or have reached the age of 75 are to be released.

IS members who fought against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or killed people in explosive attacks will not be covered by the amnesty. According to information Associated Press received from a legal expert, around 600 Syrians who have been detained on the basis of terrorism charges or links to IS could benefit as long as their "hands are not soaked in blood" or they have been detained in fighting.<sup>8</sup>

### **Israeli air strikes**

According to media reports, a well-known, pro-government businessman was killed in a suspected Israeli air strike on 15.07.24. A drone hit a vehicle he was travelling in near the Lebanese-Syrian border. He was reportedly on his way back to Syria from Lebanon.

Previously, on 09.07.24, air strikes had already targeted Tartus governorate, causing material damage. On 12.07.24, the Israeli military reported that it had attacked a military post in southern Syria after a missile had been fired from Syria into Israel. The Syrian army also announced that one Syrian soldier had been killed and three others wounded on 14.07.24 when Israeli air strikes hit military installations in southern Syria and residential buildings in Damascus. The Israeli military then stated that it was a response to the launch of two drones in the direction of Eilat the previous day.<sup>9</sup>

### **North-west: Protests against HTS leaders; increased use of so-called suicide drones**

On 12.07.24, protests were held in several towns in Idlib, demanding the overthrow of the leader of the ruling group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the release of prisoners. Türkiye's efforts to normalise relations with the Syrian government were also criticised.

Such protests have been occurring regularly since February 2024, including on 05.07.24 in the village of Binnish. The media reported that the security forces of the HTS-dominated so-called Salvation Government opened fire on protesters and arrested several people after the police station in the village was attacked and a vehicle was set on fire. On 21.07.24, a total of 28 people were reportedly detained during raids by HTS forces in the villages of Binnish and al-Fu'ah.

The private organisation Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, published a report on 08.07.24 in which they point to an increase in the use of so-called kamikaze/suicide drones by the Syrian government along the front lines in the country's north-west. The areas surrounding Hama, Aleppo and Idlib are particularly affected. In the first half of 2024, the organisation, which is active in the north-west of the country, was called out to a total of 41 such attacks that are increasing every month. A total of 21 villages are said to have already been affected, with a total of three dead and 18 wounded. In addition to the personal injuries, the use of drones also results in numerous material damages and disruptions to the daily lives of the population at risk. The organisation and several media outlets have already reported the increased use of drones in the past (cf. BN of 26.02.24).<sup>10</sup>

### **Southern Syria: Leader of an armed group killed**

According to media reports, the commander of the armed group Liwa al-Jabal, al-Jarmani, was killed in his home in Suweida city on 17.07.24. Allegedly he died from a shot fired at close range through the window of his house while he was sleeping. Although it is not known who ordered the killing, many are blaming the Syrian government. Al-Jarmani was very active in the anti-government protests that have been going on for a year in the Suweida governorate. The group he commands is one of the best-known groups in the governorate and has been involved in battles against IS in the past. It also countered the increase of the Iranian presence in the governorate. In the past, it has also supported action against other local groups linked to the government's security services that were involved in drug smuggling and criminal activities (cf. BN of 01.08.22). The group's self-declared goal is to protect the Druze population.

According to a report by Syria Direct, Al-Jarmani was one of the toughest opponents of the Syrian government in Suweida and had already been subjected to death threats in the past. He was an important supporter of and participant in the anti-government protests, which have now been going on in Suweida for almost a year (cf. BN of 10.06.24).<sup>11</sup>

## 29 July 2024

### **North-east: Attack on anti-IS coalition's military base**

On 25.07. and 26.07.24, several missiles were fired at the "Conoco" military base of the US-led international coalition against IS in Deir ez-Zor governorate.

According to reports by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the rockets were fired from areas under government control by Iranian-backed groups. This is one of the relatively few attacks that occurred during a period of calm lasting a few months, following an initial rise in attacks throughout Syria during the war in Gaza between October 2023 and January 2024. After a rocket killed three US soldiers (cf. BN of 05.02.24), the attacks initially diminished. The US military responded to the latest rocket fire with air strikes against targets of Iranian-backed militias in the region.<sup>12</sup>

### **Reports of several people killed**

Various news media unanimously reported that several people had been killed by gunfire in the southern governorate of Dar'a.

The North Press Agency published information on an incident in which two Syrians were allegedly shot dead by government forces at a checkpoint near the village of Sahem al-Golan, north-west of Dar'a city, on 28.07.24. The two people killed allegedly were former opposition members who had signed reconciliation agreements with the government in the past and were in possession of the relevant documents. No further background information on the incident was available at the time.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a Syrian man was shot dead in his motorbike workshop in al-Hrak on 24.07.24 by as yet unidentified armed individuals. According to SNHR, the man killed was a civilian who had never belonged to any armed group.

In addition, another Syrian was reportedly killed in the village of Hassan Kabir in the east of Aleppo governorate when a rocket hit his house. According to SNHR, it was unclear at first who fired the rocket. At the same time, armed clashes broke out near the village between factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) militia alliance and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are in control of the area. No further details about the background were known at the time.

The SNHR also reported that a child was shot dead on 25.07.24 when he tried to flee from a joint military operation by the SDF and US troops that took place in his home village of Harir al-Hatem in Hasakah governorate.<sup>13</sup>

## 05 August 2024

### **Arrest campaign in Babbila**

According to an article on a Syrian news portal on 31.07.24, government troops launched a large-scale arrest campaign in the village of Babbila, south of the capital Damascus.

According to the report, at least 50 young men have been arrested within a week, most of them because they were wanted for doing their military service. The government forces arrested wanted persons by setting up mobile checkpoints and by raiding. After paying large bribes, some of those arrested have been released, the report said.<sup>14</sup>

### **Reports of civilian deaths during the first half of 2024**

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) recorded a total of 1,034 civilian fatalities inside Syria in the months of January to July 2024 inclusive. The organisation provides a brief list of the individual incidents.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) recorded at least 494 civilian deaths for the same period.

Both organisations rely on figures generated by sources on the ground. In the description of its methodology, SNHR points out that the figures can only represent a minimum of the deaths that actually occur, as not all cases can be recorded due to methodological constraints, logistical limitations, safety concerns and limited resources.<sup>15</sup>

## 12 August 2024

### **Northeast: Fighting in Deir ez-Zor**

On 07.08.24, armed clashes erupted between pro-Iranian Arab tribal fighters and the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) along the internal border between areas under SDF and nominal government control.

According to media reports, the tribal fighters attacked SDF checkpoints and military posts during the night. The tribal fighters are said to have been supported by pro-Iranian militias. The SDF maintains that the attackers were government troops and their allies from the National Defence Forces (NDF) militia alliance.

The fighting lasted several days and left at least 16 civilians dead as well as two SDF members and eight members of pro-Iranian militias, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). Armed clashes resumed again in the morning of 12.08.24.

When the fighting began, the SDF declared a curfew in the areas affected by the clashes in the south and the east of Deir ez-Zor. The bombing and fighting caused many residents to flee.<sup>16</sup>

### **Northwest: Car bomb in Azaz**

On 07.08.24, at least nine people were killed by the explosion of a bomb attached to a lorry near a checkpoint in the town of Azaz. Twelve others were injured. Initially, no one claimed responsibility for the attack. Among the dead were four members of the Syrian National Army (SNA) militia alliance. Shortly afterwards, the area was reportedly shelled with rockets. These were fired from areas under the joint control of the Syrian government and the SDF, this is reported by the private civil defence organisation known as the White Helmets. No one else is said to have been injured.

The so-called Syrian Interim Government, which is supported by Türkiye and exercises control in Azaz with the support of the SNA, accused the SDF of the attack. Shortly afterwards, several rockets and artillery shells were reportedly fired at SDF sites by various SNA militias and the Turkish army. So far, there are no reports of casualties. A few days later, on 10.08.24, the Turkish Ministry of Defence announced that the army had "neutralised" (killed, wounded or arrested) twelve people it attributed to the SDF in the Aleppo governorate. The Manbij Military Council, which is associated with the SDF, stated that the Turkish military had shelled several villages with mortar and artillery shells. SOHR reported further villages under fire.<sup>17</sup>

### **Northeast: US military personnel and allies wounded in drone attack**

Several US military personnel were slightly wounded in a drone attack on the Rumalyn landing zone on 09.08.24. Initially, no one took responsibility for the attack, which was the second drone strike against the US military within a week. In the past, such attacks were executed by Iranian-backed groups. The US military is stationed in the Rumalyn landing zone together with the military personnel of other countries belonging to the international coalition combatting IS.<sup>18</sup>

## 19 August 2024

### **North-east: Fighting in Deir ez-Zor**

On 12.08.24, fighters from the Deir ez-Zor Military Council attacked three locations of pro-government troops. Allegedly, 18 pro-government fighters died during this incident. The military council, which belongs to the US-backed Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control areas in the country's north-east, described the attack as an act of retaliation after numerous civilians had previously been killed in attacks by pro-government troops along the internal Syrian border between the areas controlled by different parties (cf. BN of 12.08.24). According to reports, farmers were denied access to their fields in the affected areas, even after the clashes had subsided.

The SDF, who had cut off the supply lines to the government-controlled "security zones" in the otherwise SDF-controlled towns of Hasaka and Qamishli due to the attacks, ended the siege and allowed the transport of food and water.<sup>19</sup>

### **Hama: One dead and dozens injured after earthquake**

An earthquake of a magnitude of between 4.8 and 5.5. caused dozens of minor to moderate injuries and one suspected death on the evening of 12.08.24. Aftershocks continued into the morning hours of the next day.

However, there were no reports of major damage. In the north-west, which was hit by devastating earthquakes in February 2023, no damage was reported according to the local civil defence, also known as the White Helmets.<sup>20</sup>

### **North-west: Extension of cross-border aid**

On 12.08.24, the UN announced that the Syrian government had extended the UN's authorisation to use the two border crossings Bab al-Salama and al-Rai. The two border crossings in the north-west of the country, which allow the import of aid from Türkiye into opposition-controlled areas, have been used for cross-border aid since the strong earthquakes shook the region in February 2023. However, the UN once again pointed out that only 24% of the funding needed to provide sufficient humanitarian aid for the increased overall needs in Syria has been secured so far.<sup>21</sup>

## **26 August 2024**

### **Israeli air strikes**

According to the Syrian state news agency SANA, seven civilians were reportedly wounded in Israeli air strikes on central Syria on 23.08.24. According to the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) the targets are said to have been Hezbollah weapons and fuel depots in the governorates of Hama and Homs.<sup>22</sup>

### **North-west: Internal Syrian border crossing closed again after protests; high-ranking militia member killed**

Following the reopening of the Abu al-Zandeen crossing between areas controlled by the government and areas under opposition rule on 18.08.24, opposition groups protested and unknown gunmen fired artillery on the crossing. Thus, the crossing, which had not been used since 2020, was closed again on 20.08.24. As early as June 2024, parts of the opposition-controlled population had protested against the reopening plans, as they were considered a step towards normalisation with Syria's President Assad.

The US military claimed to have killed a high-ranking Saudi member of the al-Qaeda-affiliated group Hurras al-Din, in the Idlib governorate in a drone strike on 23.08.24.<sup>23</sup>

### **South: Armed clashes**

According to North Press Agency, five members of the Syrian military were wounded in armed clashes between government troops and local groups from the town of Dael in the Dar'a governorate on 25.08.24. According to the report, government troops had made an advance into the town of Dael in order to establish new military bases there. The pro-opposition media platform Horan Free League, on the other hand, reported that government troops had attempted to seize well drilling rigs.

In the village of Mahja in Dar'a governorate, reports from the opposition-affiliated platform Enab Baladi claim that the military exerted pressure on the population to force local groups to give up their arms. According to these reports, the village was once again threatened with a siege and a military intervention. Earlier, on 19.08.24, fighting is said to have broken out between local fighters and the so-called People's Committees associated with the government, with the former being present in eastern and the latter in western parts of the city. According to the Horan Free League, at least one person is said to have been killed. In the past, the government-backed so-called People's Committees have been accused of involvement in criminal activities, including killings, drug trafficking and exploitation. A few days earlier, local armed groups from Mahja had forced the release of a young Syrian by government troops by attacking a checkpoint and threatening to storm it. These tactics are increasingly used by local factions to extort the release of unlawfully detained persons (cf. BN of 17.06.24).<sup>24</sup>

## 02 September 2024

### **North-west: High unemployment**

According to a statement issued by the organisation Syria Response Coordinators on 12.08.24, unemployment in north-western Syria is said to have risen to over 88%. This is caused by a lack of employment opportunities, a lack of work experience and poor training, among other things.<sup>25</sup>

### **Detention of returning Syrians**

On 28.08.24, the Syrian Interior Minister stated that refugees returning to Syria would not be detained.

According to the opposition-affiliated news platform Enab Baladi, this contradicts numerous reports by human rights organisations that have documented such cases. For example, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) published in June 2024 that the organisation had recorded a total of 4,714 cases of detentions of returning refugees and internally displaced persons by Syrian government forces between the beginning of 2014 and June 2024. In 2,312 of these cases, the people concerned are still in detention. The whereabouts of 1,521 detainees are unknown. Already in the past, numerous human rights organisations and media have reported the fate of Syrians who have returned or their relatives, among them the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in February 2024.

According to a report by the opposition-affiliated news platform Syria TV, a Syrian man who was allegedly deported from Türkiye in September 2023 and detained by government forces while trying to reach his family in the south of the country, died while in custody. After he had already been in prison for several months, the family was blackmailed for money by a government official. About a month later, on 06.08.24, the body was handed over to the family.<sup>26</sup>

### **Disappearance of two Jordanians**

The Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on 28.08.24 that two Jordanian nationals were missing in Syria. The two men were delivering goods from Amman to Damascus but did not return. According to the family of one of the victims, the men had been abducted. A search operation by a local group near the village of Dael in the Dar'a governorate was unsuccessful so far.<sup>27</sup>

### **North-west: Journalist arrested**

According to reports from 27.08.24, a local journalist who also works for international news agencies was arrested by the Turkish-backed authorities in north-western Syria. The Turkish-backed local military police are said to have arrested him and his wife in the village of al-Bab. His wife, who is also a journalist, was released after one to two hours. No official arrest warrant was presented and the charges against the journalist remained unclear.<sup>28</sup>

## 09 September 2024

### **Israeli air strikes**

According to Syrian state media, at least four people were killed and 13 others wounded in Israeli air strikes on targets in rural areas of the governorates of Tartus and Hama late in the evening of 08.09.24.

It was initially unclear whether the victims were civilians or members of armed groups. The Reuters news agency quotes two local intelligence sources who report that the attacks in Hama were aimed at a military research facility for the production of chemical weapons in the village of Masyaf. A team of Iranian military experts is believed to have been involved in the production of these weapons.<sup>29</sup>

### **Arrest of returnees**

According to media reports based on local sources, around 200 civilians were arrested by government troops on 03.08.24 as they passed through a checkpoint in the Damascus region. The reports say that they had been visiting relatives in north-west Syria, in areas under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Shams (HTS) and other opposition groups and were on their way back to Damascus.

The 200 people had travelled to the north in buses as part of a trip organised by a travel agency. According to one activist, however, the detainees had visited areas in Manbij that were under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF) and then the city of Aleppo, which is (largely) under government control. The government forces nevertheless accused them of coming from areas under the control of opposition groups in the north.<sup>30</sup>

### **North-west: Attacks by government troops**

The pro-opposition news platform Syria TV quoted local sources on 08.09.24 which said that government forces and their allies had intensified attacks with mortar shells and suicide drones on several areas in the country's north-west. The targets included the village of Deir Sunbul south of Aleppo, the village of Kafr Taal west of Aleppo and the village of Benin, also south of Aleppo.

On 07.09.24, four children were reportedly wounded by machine gun fire aimed at the village of Umm Wartha in eastern Aleppo. Umm Wartha is under the joint control of the government and the SDF. In the previous week, more than 13 other civilians were reportedly wounded as well. Syria TV reported that the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, which is active in the north-west, stated that allegedly the Russian and Syrian military attacked educational institutions in the north-west 172 times since 2019.<sup>31</sup>

## **16 September 2024**

### **Israeli air strikes**

According to media reports, the destruction of a suspected Hezbollah weapons production facility in the village of Masyaf in Hama governorate (cf. BN of 09.09.24) not only involved air strikes on the facility, but also the deployment of Israeli special forces on the ground to completely destroy the partially underground facility and secure evidence. According to Syrian state media, 18 people are said to have been killed and 37 others wounded. The pro-opposition news platform Syria TV reported witness statements saying that also two Iranians were captured during the Israeli raid.

Further suspected Israeli air strikes on targets in the Quneitra governorate in the country's south followed on 12.09.24. According to media reports, a car and targets on agricultural land were bombed. An unknown number of casualties were reported whose identities were unknown at the time. Targets near the towns of Jamla and Abidin in the neighbouring governorate of Dar'a were also hit.

The Israeli military, which does not usually release statements on activities in Syria, stated on 13.09.24 that it had taken action against targets in Syria during the previous week. However, no position was taken regarding the reports of the ground operation.<sup>32</sup>

### **North-east: Challenges in the water supply**

Several media outlets recently reported various challenges in supplying the population with water. According to one article, various drinking water stations in rural Deir ez-Zor stopped working after the Services and Fuels Committee of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) ended its support for the sites. There was not enough fuel to continue their operation. At the time of writing, the villages of Hajin, Sha'fah, Baghouz, Tayyanah, Abu Hamam, Gharanji and Kashkiyah have reportedly been without water for around a week. As a result, the prices for water from tanker lorries, from which private individuals can buy water, are also said to have risen significantly.

Another news portal reported on 12.09.24 that the water supply in Hasaka governorate poses particular challenges for the civilian population. The area is supplied by tankers run by aid organisations or commercial companies that distribute water. According to the report, this system exposes users to an increased risk of exploitation and harassment. In a non-representative survey of 50 women, 26% said they had been harassed in the past by people working for the water supply system (16% were not sure, 60% answered no to the question). Furthermore, the price of water from tankers tripled compared to the summer of 2023, the report said.

On 11.09.24, North Press Agency reported Turkish bombings of targets in rural Raqqa, which allegedly affected the water supply installations once again. According to the report, Turkish air strikes near Ain Issa disabled the water pumping station in the village of al-Hishah. A total of 13 villages are said to have been cut off from their drinking water supply as a result. In addition, employees of the water directorate in the city of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab) were allegedly exposed to gunfire by members of the Turkish-backed militias of the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA) on 20.08.24.

In the past, there have been frequent reports of civilian infrastructure being disrupted by Turkish air strikes (cf. BN of 22.01.24).<sup>33</sup>

### **Aleppo: 64 people arrested**

According to media reports, a total of 64 people were arrested by government forces in eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo city on 14.09.24 as part of an arrest campaign. According to a source in government security circles, the majority of those arrested were conscripts and reserve service conscripts as well as some people wanted for criminal offences. The source informed that the Military Security Department made the arrests and transferred the individuals to the respective services that had initiated the arrests. Nine people are said to have been released again the following day due to a mix-up of names, while the remaining detainees remain in custody.<sup>34</sup>

## **23 September 2024**

### **Latakia: Arrest of prominent government critics**

According to media reports, three Alawites were arrested by government troops in the Latakia governorate between 14.08. and 09.09.24. The three people concerned were reportedly two prominent doctors and a car parts dealer who were considered to be critics of the central government in Damascus. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the proceedings are being kept under wraps and the whereabouts of the three detainees are unclear. According to a single source, they were accused of having founded an opposition movement and being in contact with opposition forces abroad.<sup>35</sup>

## **30 September 2024**

### **Thousands of refugees from Lebanon**

According to media reports, thousands of Syrians and Lebanese have crossed the border into Syria fleeing the escalation of violence in Lebanon. In addition to the official border crossings, hundreds of people are said to have used smuggling routes to enter Syria unnoticed by the authorities. According to UNHCR estimates, a total of around 30,000 people, around 80% Syrian nationals, had fled from Lebanon by 27.09.24. Around half of these were said to be children and young people. Fewer men crossed the border than women. A report by the local broadcaster Sham FM referred to a statement by the deputy governor of Rif Dimashq, who said that around 31,000 Syrian and 11,000 Lebanese nationals are said to have crossed the border by 25.09.24. The pro-opposition media platform Syria TV referred to statements by the governor of Idlib on 28.09.24, who stated that around 40 Syrian families who came from Lebanon had been resettled in villages in rural Idlib whose residents had been forced to flee towards the Turkish border in the past. Refugees are also said to have arrived in north-eastern Syria, in areas under the control of the self-administration of northern and eastern Syria. According to media reports, those who cannot afford to flee or who fear being wanted for military or reserve service or for opposition activities are forced to stay in Lebanon.<sup>36</sup>

### **HAD and IS members killed by US air strikes**

According to the US Central Command, nine members of the militia, including a high-ranking commander, were killed in an air strike on Hurras al-Din (HAD) in north-western Syria on 24.09.24. The group is an al-Qaeda-affiliated militia. A few days earlier, on 19.09.24, at least 28 IS members, including four high-ranking members, were killed in a US air strike on an IS training camp in central Syria.<sup>37</sup>

### **North-east: lack of medication**

On 29.09.24, North Press Agency reported about a worsening shortage of medicines in north-eastern Syria. According to the report, numerous medicines for chronic illnesses have not been available for weeks or months. Even alternatives for certain medication are no longer available. Patients suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure and heart problems are among those affected. A representative of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which controls the north-east, stated that around 30% of the most basic medicines were not available. He cited import restrictions from the areas under government control as the reason for this. The

dependence on the government areas could therefore not be mitigated by importing medicines from abroad, he said.<sup>38</sup>

### **North-west: Several dead in government attacks**

On 29.09.24, the pro-opposition medium Syria TV quoted reports from the Syrian Civil Defence, the so-called White Helmets, according to which two civilians were killed in government artillery attacks on the village of Sarmin in north-western Syria. Other villages in western Aleppo, including Kafr Nouran, Kafr Taal and Makalbis, as well as Ayn Issa and Qalaba, are said to have been bombed by drones, artillery fire and air strikes. In the south of Idlib, the villages of al-Ruwaiha, Sufuhan and Fleifel, as well as the outskirts of Taftanaz, are also said to have been hit by attacks. The White Helmets stated that they had recorded 650 attacks by the Syrian and Russian military up to 15.09.24. More than 54 people have been killed and 245 others injured.

A few days earlier, on 23.09.24, six people, including a child, were reportedly killed in attacks on the village of Kafriyya in eastern Idlib. Eleven others were reportedly injured.<sup>39</sup>

## **07 October 2024**

### **Hundreds of thousands of people from Lebanon seeking protection**

Syrian media reported on 03.10.24 that a large number of people had fled from Lebanon to Syria since the beginning of escalations in Lebanon on 23.09.24. While the Syrian authorities state that some 197,000 Syrian nationals are among those who have fled Lebanon, at least 72,000 Lebanese are also reported to have fled to Syria up to 03.10.24. According to the UNHCR, 60 % of the refugees are under 18 years of age. Those entering Syria were headed for various regions, including those under government control, the areas governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and also regions in the north-west which are still under the control of rebel groups. According to a report from the pro-opposition media platform Enab Baladi, hundreds of people wishing to enter the north-west, which is controlled by opposition groups, were detained for days at the Aoun al-Dadat crossing point and refused entry. The hold-ups allegedly related to security checks by the military police of the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA), the rebel alliance in north-western Syria which is supported by Türkiye.

Despite the completed security checks, 95 refugees were reportedly arrested by SNA groups during or after entry into the territories. The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham group, which controls large parts of Idlib, also arrested 13 of these refugees, including five women, on 05.10.24. They are accused of cooperating with the Lebanese Hezbollah.

In its monthly report, the most recent issue of which appeared on 02.10.24 for September, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) notes that it has been notified of a total of 206 cases of arbitrary arrest, including nine cases involving people who had fled to Syria due to the most recent escalation in Lebanon. According to the report, these nine arrests took place at border crossing points and concerned first and foremost individuals who had evaded service in the military or the reserves. No further information was available as to the whereabouts of the arrested individuals at the time of the report. SNHR stresses that, on account of numerous methodological and logistical restrictions and in view of the complex security situations, the numbers it has recorded cannot be complete and the actual numbers are substantially higher.

The North Press news agency, for example, cites a refugee who travelled to Syria herself and stated after arriving in the AANES territories that around 40 refugees had been detained by Syrian government troops when entering the country from Lebanon on 02.10.24.<sup>40</sup>

### **Israeli air strikes**

A number of people have been killed in air raids which are presumed to have been carried out by the Israeli air force in Syria. According to state media, three civilians were killed in strikes on targets in Damascus on 01.10.24 and three more died on the following day. It cannot be verified whether the victims were actually civilians. A state broadcaster has announced that a presenter has been killed.

According to various reports, it appears that on 29.09.24 an attack also took place on the private villa of the president's brother, Maher al-Assad, who leads the 4th Division. The 4th Division is believed to have close links to Iran and Hezbollah. Accordingly, the villa is said to be visited regularly by high-ranking members of the militia and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The Israeli authorities assume that important arms smuggling routes run through

Syria to Lebanon and enable Iran to supply Hezbollah with arms. Since the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip, Israeli attacks on targets with links to Iran and its allies have increased substantially.<sup>41</sup>

### **Southern Syria: Exploding war remnants kill two**

Two people died when a landmine exploded in Dar'a governorate on 02.10.24. They were reportedly travelling in a car on farming land when a landmine exploded. One source has spoken of two young men, another of two children. The exact age of those who died is not known.<sup>42</sup>

## **14 October 2024**

### **Israeli air strikes**

A number of people have been killed in air raids which are presumed to have been carried out by the Israeli air force in Syria. State media have reported that seven civilians were killed and eleven injured in a strike on a residential building in the Damascus district of Al Mezzeh on 08.10.24.

A Yemini national and his wife and children are said to have been among the dead. According to contradictory reports in the media, the target was either a high-ranking commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard or a high-ranking member of Hezbollah. This was reportedly the third attack on targets in this district since the beginning of the month.<sup>43</sup>

### **North-west: Hostilities**

It has been reported in the media that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) began air strikes on positions of the Syrian army and allied militias in Aleppo and Idlib governorates on 11.10.24. HTS, which controls large parts of Idlib and is the largest force within the so-called "Al-Fatah al-Mubin" operations room - a network for the military coordination of a number of opposition groups in the north-west - is reported to have attacked positions of forces loyal to the government in a number of localities, including Saraqib and Basratun. The Syrian military has shelled positions of HTS and other groups in Idlib and Aleppo. Military skirmishes on an unusual scale are said to have been ongoing for a week. Numerous families have reportedly left their homes close to the course of the border for fear of a greater escalation. According to the pro-opposition Enab Baladi media platform, a local aid organisation has counted 7,315 people who have fled their homes. At least eight people are believed to have been killed and 38 wounded.<sup>44</sup>

## **21 October 2024**

### **North-west: Escalation of violence**

According to information from the UN's regional coordinator for humanitarian issues for Syria, at least twelve civilians were killed between 14.10. and 17.10.24 against the backdrop of the recent upsurge in fighting in the north-west of the country. In addition, a total of ten health facilities have been forced to discontinue their work.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Russian warplanes carried out a total of 28 air strikes on both military and civilian targets in rural Idlib and Latakia on 16.10.24. While military targets relating to the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, which controls large parts of Idlib, are said to have been hit, the Syrian Civil Defence organisation, which is also known as the White Helmets, has reported that a civilian furniture factory was also hit, killing ten employees and injuring 32. The bombardment by Syrian and Russian troops in areas of rural Idlib and Aleppo continues. According to a report by the media platform Syria TV, four civilian vehicles were attacked in Aleppo by drones loaded with explosives on 20.10.24.

In addition, armed clashes broke out between two factions of the so-called Syrian National Army, which controls the north of Aleppo. Tensions which had been rising for some weeks between the so-called Al-Sham Front and the so-called United Troops escalated into armed clashes on 16.10.24. On 17.10.24 the White Helmets brokered a truce to enable the evacuation of wounded civilians in the affected regions.<sup>45</sup>

### **North-east: Shelling of pro-government bases**

It has been reported in the media that three positions of the Syrian military in the towns of Khasham, Marat and Al-Tabiya were shelled from the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on 14.10.24. Additional Iranian positions in Hatlah and Huwayja Sakr are also said to have been hit.

Several media have attributed the attacks to the US military and/or the US-led coalition to fight IS. Two media portals reported that four civilians had been injured.<sup>46</sup>

## **28 October 2024**

### **Damascus: Israeli air strikes**

According to Syrian state media, two people were killed in an Israeli air strike on a car in the Damascene district of Al Mezzeh on 21.10.24. An Israeli military spokesman has stated that the head of Hezbollah's money transfer enterprise was among the dead.

Al Mezzeh has been the target of Israeli air raids on numerous occasions in the past (cf. BN of 14.10.24).

The Syrian defence minister has reported that one soldier was killed and seven injured in further supposedly Israeli air strikes on targets in the Damascene district of Kafr Sousa and a military location in rural Homs.<sup>47</sup>

### **North-east: Bombardment by Turkish military**

In the wake of a lethal attack by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Ankara (see article on Türkiye), on 23.10.24 and the following days the Turkish military bombed targets in Syria which it linked to the PKK and affiliated groups. According to information from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), twelve civilians were killed and 25 injured in the air strikes on 23.10.24. The most influential fighting forces within the SDF, which exercises control in the north-east, are the Kurdish People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - YPG), which Türkiye regards as having close links to the PKK. According to the SDF, bakeries, power stations, oil installations and local checkpoints were among the targets that were hit.

According to reports in the media, targets in Al-Bab, in Aleppo governorate, were shelled from territories controlled by the SDF on 24.10.24, injuring seven civilians. Shortly before, the SDF had published a statement announcing that counter-strikes had been launched against Turkish bases and locations of Türkiye-backed militias, killing a number of military personnel.<sup>48</sup>

## **04 November 2024**

### **Refugees from Lebanon**

According to the most recent estimates released by the UNHCR on 01.11.24, some 473,000 people are believed to have fled to Syria since the beginning of the war in Lebanon. 71 % of these refugees are said to be Syrians, with Lebanese and third-country nationals making up the rest. According to the UNHCR, women and children account for more than 80 % of the households which have fled Lebanon.

UNRWA in Syria has reported that as per 27.10.24 a total of 904 Palestinians who had fled Lebanon had turned to the refugee relief agency. This corresponds to an estimated 4,500 people, although the UN relief agency assumes that the actual numbers of Palestinian families to have fled to Syria are substantially higher. A poll covering 733 of these households revealed that around 56 % had previously lived in Syria and had fled the country during the civil war.

Some 7,500 people are said to have sought refuge in north-west Syria, although the inner-Syrian border crossings to the north-west have reportedly been closed to people from Lebanon for a number of weeks now.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) recorded the arrest by government troops of 25 Syrian men and one Syrian woman entering the country from Lebanon between 23.09. and 25.10.24. According to the SNHR, the majority of those taken into custody originate from territories which are not fully under government control (Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, Suweida). The network stresses that on account of methodical and logistical constraints and security considerations the stated figures only represent a minimum estimate of the actual number of such cases. According to estimates contained in the report, around 23,400 Syrians have travelled to areas outside of government control. Based on interviews with family members, HRW has documented the arrests of five Syrians from Lebanon in the course of October.<sup>49</sup>

### **North-west: Bombardment by government troops**

According to reports in the media, the Syrian military has continued its bombardment of targets in north-west Syria with artillery fire and missiles, as well as so-called kamikaze drones. No reliable figures are available regarding the

number of people killed and injured. Parts of the population having fled their homes as a result of the military escalation in recent weeks (cf. BN of 21.10.24) and some of these having since returned to their homes, 1,843 have now once again fled their homes close to the inner-Syrian front.<sup>50</sup>

### **Central Syria: US air strikes**

US Central Command announced on 30.10.24 that air strikes carried out two days previously on targets linked to IS in central system had killed 35 members of the extremist group. There have apparently been no reports of any civilians coming to harm.<sup>51</sup>

### **North-east: Bombardment by Turkish military**

Following sustained Turkish air strikes on targets in the Kurdish-run north-east of Syria (cf. BN of 28.10.24), at least 18 people were killed and 60 injured in the period up to 29.10.24.

According to information from the military council of Manbij, 689 Turkish projectiles were fired at the area around Manbij alone in the course of October, including artillery shells, mortar shells and drones. Two fighters have reportedly been killed in the area, three civilians have been killed and eleven wounded. According to its own account, the military council launched a counter-offensive involving operations against seven Turkish military bases, in the course of which 17 members of the Turkish military and ten fighters of Turkey-backed militias were allegedly killed and 21 injured. These figures have yet to be confirmed by the Turkish military, however, and no independent verification has been possible.<sup>52</sup>

## **18 November 2024**

### **Israeli air strikes**

According to Syrian state media, at least 15 people have been killed and 16 injured in Israeli air strikes on targets in the Damascus districts of Al Mezzeh and Sayyidah Zaynab, in the south of Homs and in the Damascus suburb of Qudsaya. Civilians, including at least two children, are said to be among those killed in the Al Mezzeh district. The Israeli military has stated that it targeted infrastructure and command centres of the Islamic Jihad group. The Associated Press news agency has quoted an anonymous member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group who has confirmed that an office of the group in Damascus was hit and several members were killed.<sup>53</sup>

### **US air strikes**

In response to attacks by various Iran-backed militias on members of the US military, US troops carried out air strikes on a total of nine targets at two of the groups' bases in Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has reported that five pro-Iranian fighters were killed and others injured at one of the groups' bases in Albukamal.<sup>54</sup>

## **25 November 2024**

### **Israeli air strikes**

The Israeli military continues to carry out recurring air strikes on positions of pro-Iranian militias. According to initial reports by Syrian state media, more than 36 people were killed and 50 injured in attacks close to the town of Palmyra on 20.11.24.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claims that more than 105 people were killed (as per 24.11.24). 70 of these were reportedly Syrians linked to pro-Iranian militias, in addition to which two civilians were among the dead. An additional 15 people are reported to have been injured, including five civilians. The targeted locations reportedly included arms caches as well as accommodation for families of pro-Iranian fighters.

The Observatory has recorded more than 150 air strikes on targets in Syria since the beginning of the year, in the course of which 405 fighters have been killed and 286 injured. Civilian casualties totalling 64 dead and 67 injured have also been recorded.<sup>55</sup>

### **North-west: Deaths and injuries in attacks from government-held territories**

In a report published on 18.11.24, the Syrian Civil Defence organisation, which is also known as the White Helmets, states that at least 15 civilians were killed in Russian and Syrian air strikes on targets in north-west Syria in October

2024. At least 90 people were injured in the attacks. A strong increase in the frequency of the air strikes in the middle of October 2024 prompted people to flee their homes (cf. BN of 21.10.24). On 14.10.24 alone, a total of 25 Russian air strikes were recorded on various areas in rural Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia.<sup>56</sup>

## **02 December 2024**

### **Rebel offensive: Aleppo captured; SDF also on the back foot**

On 27.11.24 various rebel groups from north-west Syria under the leadership of the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group (HTS) and accompanied by Türkiye-backed militias began to advance into territories under government control and to capture large areas of land.

According to information from members of the Turkish military, the rebels had initially planned a limited offensive to stop attacks from government-held territories and to enable people who had fled their homes to return. The low level of resistance offered by pro-government forces surprised many observers. By 30.11.24, the rebels had already taken control of most of Aleppo, the country's most populous city. This gain for the rebels was accompanied by the first air strikes on Aleppo to be carried out by the Syrian air force since 2016 in its fight against the rebels. The Russian defence ministry has announced that it also carried out air strikes against rebels in Aleppo and Idlib governorates.

The offensive in the north-west of Syria was accompanied by apparently spontaneous armed clashes in other parts of the country. According to the UN, in addition to Aleppo and Idlib, such clashes also took place in Hama, Dar'a, Rif Dimashq and Suweida governorates. By the end of 30.11.24, the rebels had taken control of at least four towns in Hama governorate. Forces loyal to the government have so far managed to defend Hama, capital of the governorate of the same name, however. On the same day, the Syrian army released a statement announcing that it was preparing for a counter-offensive.

Many residents reportedly fled their homes after Aleppo was taken over by the Islamist rebels. According to the Kurdish-led administration in north-east Syria, some 3,000 people have already fled east, for example. HTS representatives have announced in statements that the people, including religious or ethnic minorities in particular, have no need to fear their rule. The HTS called on the remaining units of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the eastern part of Aleppo to withdraw their weapons and personnel to the north-east. On 02.12.24 the SDF duly announced that they would set up a corridor to north-east Syria, running from east Aleppo and the city of Tal Rifaat situated further to the north. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, some 200,000 Kurds live in the region.<sup>57</sup>

## **09 December 2024**

### **Assad government overthrown**

After further governorate capitals had been captured largely without a fight (Hama on 05.12.24, Homs on 07.12.24), the capital, Damascus, finally fell under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on the morning of 08.12.24.

The offensive from the north-west (cf. BN 02.12.24) sparked spontaneous armed uprisings in other regions, thus taking in Suweida and Dar'a governorates as well. On 06.12.24 the Russian embassy in Damascus called on its citizens to leave the country and the Iranian military left the country via the border crossings into Iraq and Lebanon or by means of the air and sea route via Latakia.

According to reports in the media, the Syrian army left its posts in large numbers, leaving military equipment and stores behind. Thousands of soldiers are said to have deserted, replaced their uniforms with civilian clothing and mingled with the civilian population. According to the HTS militia, the country's governmental institutions are to remain for the time being under the supervision of the present prime minister, who is to oversee the transition period. It is not currently known whether HTS fighters have advanced into the governorate capitals on the Syrian coast - Latakia and Tartus -, where the vast majority of the country's Alawites live and which serve as a power base of former president Assad, who has reportedly fled to Moscow with Russian support. Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, leader of the Islamist HTS militia, staged a PR coup when he entered the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on 08.12.24, where he held a speech celebrating victory over Assad's rule and "Iranian ambitions" in Syria.

The capture of the infamous Sednaya prison complex, where many men, women and children were freed, also drew much attention. The prison complex reportedly incorporates various underground levels, some of which are barricaded. Rescue forces had not yet been able to fully access all these levels on the morning of 09.12.24. An investigation by the UN in 2016 revealed that so many people had been tortured to death in the prisons that it used the term "annihilation" in its report.

After emerging from the protests against Assad's hegemony which began in 2011 against the backdrop of the so-called Arab Spring, the opposition never managed to formulate a joint vision of a new political order for the time after Assad, beyond calling for the overthrow of the government.<sup>58</sup>

#### **Northern Syria: SNA and Turkish army attack SDF**

According to various consistent reports, on 08.12.24 the Turkish army attacked positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Manjib in the north of Aleppo governorate with drones, following fighting on the previous day between the SDF and the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SDF has stated that at least 22 of its fighters were killed and 40 injured.

The UN has reported that as per 05.12.24 some 60,000 to 80,000 people had already fled sustained fighting between the SDF and the SNA.

While both the SDF and the SNA have welcomed the fall of the Assad government, they remain hostile towards one another over control of the northern territories (some of which have majority Kurdish populations). The US defence secretary and the Turkish minister of defence spoke to each other on the telephone after the hostilities, with the aim of de-escalating the situation.<sup>59</sup>

#### **USA bombs IS positions; Israel secures Golan Heights**

The USA announced on 08.12.24 that it had attacked dozens of IS positions in central Syria from the air. In all, 75 targets are said to have been hit. There have apparently been no reports of any civilian casualties. The attacks are said to have been timed so as to prevent the IS from exploiting the volatile political situation for its own ends.

According to a newspaper report, on 08.12.24 the Israeli military moved into Syrian territory beyond the annexed Golan Heights for the first time since the October War or Yom Kippur War of 1973. The mountain region in Syria's Quneitra governorate around the summit of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in Syria, has reportedly been secured in order to establish a temporary "buffer zone" until an agreement on the vicinity is reached with the new rulers in Damascus.

In addition, the Israeli air force reportedly also bombed various Syrian military installations on 07.12. and 08.12.24. The country's remaining arsenal of chemical weapons is believed to have been stored there. In the course of the bombing, elements of Russian air defence systems and an arsenal of ballistic ground-to-ground missiles were also destroyed.<sup>60</sup>

### **16 December 2024**

#### **Changeover of power; fate of many Assad loyalists uncertain**

On 13.12.24 tens of thousands of people congregated at Umayyad Square, a roundabout close to the mosque of the same name in the centre of Damascus, to observe Friday prayers and celebrate the end of Assad's rule. The sermon at the Umayyad mosque was held by interim prime minister Al-Bashir. The leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ahmad al-Sharaa, who has now abandoned his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, congratulated the people via a video link.

Al-Sharaa announced in a written statement on 11.12.24 that he would not grant pardons for anyone who had been involved in the torture or murder of prisoners under Assad's government. He undertook to find perpetrators who were still in the country and to request other countries to extradite perpetrators from their territories. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported on the same day about attacks by armed groups on people in residential districts which were known to be Assad strongholds. Homes were reportedly plundered and occupants intimidated. While prominent Assad supporters, such as his brother, Maher, or major general Al Mamlouk, have reportedly fled to Russia and Lebanon respectively, the whereabouts of many other leading figures from the toppled government remain unclear.

On 14.12.24 the Turkish foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, opened the Turkish embassy in Damascus, which had been closed since 2012.<sup>61</sup>

### **North-east Syria: SDF withdraw from Manbij; raising of Syria's new flag**

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stated on 11.12.24 that it had consented to a ceasefire agreement brokered by the USA and Türkiye (cf. BN of 09.12.24), under which they are required to withdraw their forces from Manbij. This means that the city is now under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA), an Islamist rebel organisation supported by Türkiye. Manbij had been controlled by the SDF for more than eight years, after it drove IS out of the city in August 2016. The SDF leadership has criticised the USA for failing to prevent the attacks on the Kurds by Türkiye and allied militia, pointing out that Manbij was liberated from IS with the help of the US military and that IS might be able to exploit any weakening of the SDF in the region. According to information from the USA, the SDF is currently still holding some 9,000 IS fighters captive at more than 90 detention centres spread over north-east Syria.

On 12.12.24 the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), the civilian counterpart to the SDF, stated that it had raised Syria's new flag on the buildings of all its institutions. In its statement, it committed itself to Syrian unity and its national identity. To date, DAANES had for years positioned itself as a third party between the Syrian government and the armed opposition. This symbolic act can be seen as manifesting a willingness to work together with the new rulers in Damascus.<sup>62</sup>

### **Refugee movements**

According to updated figures from the UN, 1.1 million people have become internally displaced as a result of the HTS offensive, in particular inhabitants of Aleppo, Idlib, Hama and Homs governorates. Refugee movements are observable above all in Idlib, Hama, Rif Dimashq, Aleppo and Tartus governorates. At the same time, some 5,000 people are reported to have left their emergency accommodation at camps for internally displaced people in order to return to their homes. The security situation is said to have improved most recently in the majority regions; only in north-east Syria does the UN describe the situation as volatile, due to major territorial and political changes.

The UN also reports that as per 13.12.24 just under 10,000 people had returned to Syria from Lebanon since 08.12.24. Tens of thousands of people reportedly returned to Lebanon from Syria during the same period (against the backdrop of the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah). Around 1,000 Syrians are said to have fled to Iraq, including 800 on 11.12.24 alone.<sup>63</sup>

## **23 December 2024**

### **Status clarification processes for former SAA and NDF members**

According to the new rulers, former members of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and pro-Iranian militias who were organised as part of the National Defence Forces (NDF) are to be given the opportunity to pass through a status clarification process to establish whether the individuals concerned were responsible for crimes under Assad's government and are to face criminal prosecution or whether they are eligible for amnesty.

To this end, former soldiers, officers and medical personnel of the SAA have been called on to report to so-called reconciliation centres, where they are to identify themselves and hand in weapons and other equipment. An international daily newspaper has reported that one of the first such reconciliation centres opened in Latakia on 18.12.24 on the grounds of a former security authority establishment. More than 600 people are said to have appeared on the first day, followed by an even greater number on the following day, for which no precise figure has been stated.

All those reporting to the centre – primarily men, but also including a number of women – were photographed and issued with an identification document which is initially valid for three months. According to a local representative of the interior ministry in Latakia, after three months the individuals concerned must report to a security headquarters in order to continue the process.

Prior to the fall of Assad's government on 08.12.24, a so-called reconciliation centre was set up in HTS-controlled Aleppo on 06.12.24.<sup>64</sup>

### **Former armed opposition groups are to be integrated into the Syrian army**

Citing the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Syrian state media reported on 17.12.24 that all armed groups in the country are to be dissolved and their fighters are to be put under the command of the defence ministry. Meanwhile, the new interior ministry has called on people to apply to the country's police academies for posts within the security service.<sup>65</sup>

### **Reports of isolated attacks on Alawites**

An international news agency reported on 21.12.24 that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) had documented at least 72 killings of people belonging to various ethnic and religious minorities since the fall of Assad's government on 08.12.24. All of the incidents concerned have reportedly occurred in the religiously diverse governorates of Hama, Homs, Tartus and Latakia.

According to the news agency report, around a dozen Alawites were killed by armed men in the village of Bahra (Hama) between 09.12. and 11.12.24. Six and two people were killed respectively in the neighbouring villages of Mouaa and Um al-Amad. All three villages are now said to be virtually deserted, the villagers having fled to Tartus. In response, the HTS militia reportedly organised a meeting on the weekend of 20.12. and 21.12.24 which was attended by Sunni and Alawite dignitaries from the villages of Rabia, Tizin, Metnine and Mouaa. An end to the violent attacks was agreed at the meeting.<sup>66</sup>

### **Occupied buffer zone: Israel braced for protracted presence in the area**

Following the Israeli army's advance into the demilitarised buffer zone along the Golan Heights in the Syrian governorate of Quneitra (cf. BN of 09.12.24) and its occupation of the summit of Mount Hermon, Syria's highest mountain, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu visited one of the newly established military bases on 17.12.24. He reiterated Israel's intention to maintain a military presence in the buffer zone until an agreement guaranteeing Israel's security was reached with the new rulers in Damascus.

Mount Hermon is less than ten km away from the Golan Heights, which have been occupied by Israel since 1967. In a press statement on 17.12.24, the Israeli defence minister stated that the mountain constituted a strategically important position from which Hezbollah in the Beqaa Valley in neighbouring Lebanon could be observed more effectively. He also stated that the Israeli presence would act as a deterrent for rebels in Damascus who claim to represent a moderate stance but are actually to be seen as part of the most extreme branches of Islamism.

Ahmad al-Shara, leader of the HTS militia, criticised Israel's action, insisting that Syria would abide by the 1974 ceasefire agreement with Israel and pointing out that the danger posed to Israel by pro-Iranian militias had been averted by the overthrow of Assad's government.

On 15.12.24 the Israeli government additionally approved the building of further settlements in the Golan Heights, asserting that the doubling of the Israeli population in the Golan Heights which is being pursued by issuing the building permits will strengthen the region's defendability.

It is estimated that 20,000 Israelis currently live in the Golan Heights, along with 20,000 Syrian nationals. The Syrians living here originate for the most part from Syria's Druze Arab minority. In contrast to the West Bank, which Israel regards as a disputed region, the Golan Heights have been treated as Israeli territory since they were annexed from Syria in 1981.<sup>67</sup>

### **North-east: SNA attacks on Ain al-Arab (Kobanê)**

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have reported that they were attacked by fighters of the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) at numerous positions around the city of Ain al-Arab (Kurdish: Kobanê) in Aleppo governorate and along the Euphrates on 18.12.24.

The city is the SDF's last major stronghold in Aleppo governorate between Tal Abyad in the east and Jarabulus and Manbij in the west, all of which are under the control of the SNA and the Turkish military. Ain al-Arab / Kobanê has a majority Kurdish population. The city is of great symbolic significance on account of the hard-fought victory over IS rule in 2016. Following the SNA's capture of Manbij on 11.12.24 (cf. BN of 16.12.24), a temporary ceasefire was agreed for the entire region. Fighting prior to the capture of the city caused thousands of people to flee their homes. On 17.12.24 the SDF leadership committed to a peace plan under which they were to withdraw their fighters from Kobanê in return for the creation of a demilitarised zone under the supervision of the US Army.

According to reports in the media, two journalists were killed in a Turkish drone attack near to the Tishrin Dam, some 60 km south of Ain al-Arab / Kobanê, on 20.12.24. The journalists were working for Kurdish media companies in Türkiye.<sup>68</sup>

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Briefing Notes  
BN-Redaktion@bamf.bund.de

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