

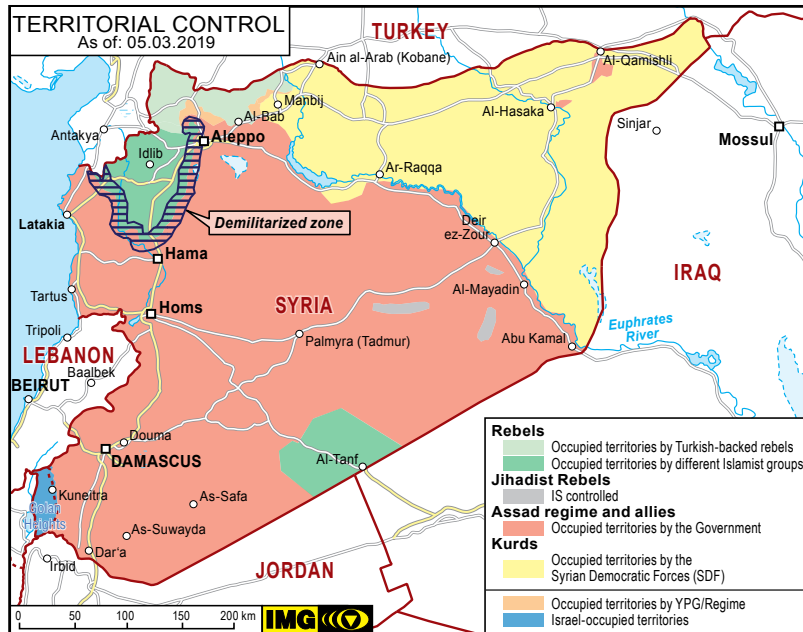


FACT SHEET SYRIA

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During winter 2018 - 19 the Assad regime managed somehow to overcome its isolation whilst the EU continues to sanction regime luminaries. On the battlefield too the regime stood its ground. The Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) mop-up operations east of Palmyra allow Russia to further reduce its presence. Yet things are far from over as Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria show. As Iran threatened and Damascus protested the Israelis, their ally Russia negotiated with Tel Aviv to reduce the presence of all foreign forces in the country. This must be read as a snub against

Iran-led militias, coming after the US president's declaration on the pullout of US troops from Syria. Syria's Kurds and their Arab allies continued their cooperation with the US against ISIS. Fears about Turkey were alleviated by American assurances and the military defeat of Ankara's allies in Idlib. Russian-mediated talks with Damascus went nowhere as the regime refuses any kind of autonomy. Even so, Assad took some legal steps towards reconciliation and some refugees return on a very slow pace.



MAP ANALYSIS

New developments could be observed in the north, east and west of Syria: While the US announced to leave a peacekeeping force of around 200 soldiers in al-Tanf and 200 more soldiers in the north and north-east of the country, the remaining ISIS fighters in the province of Deir ez-Zour were surrounded by the SDF in an area less than 0.5km² in Baghouz. At the same time the SAA and National Defence Force (NDF) proceeded against ISIS, conducting combing operations in the desert around Palmyra, where some thousands ISIS fighters were still presumed to hide. Meanwhile, shelling by the SAA in southern Idlib intensified.

Note: No claim to completeness of the map is put forward.

FORECAST

While there can be no doubt that the last Astana summit ended without a major breakthrough, it was not futile neither as the meeting itself helped to ameliorate relations between Turkey and Iran involving also Russia and Syria. A strengthened Assad will not deviate from his line of making peace according to his own terms, which will negatively affect the refugees' willingness to return.

Apparently all parties involved agree on the return of the regime to Rojava. This forces the YPG to skilfully use its powerful relations with the western media to pressure the Europeans. Quite interestingly no one less than the US president strengthened their hand when he demanded from Europe to take back captured Western ISIS fighters. The fate of these fighters confronts European decision makers not only with a set of legal and political problems, which they avoided to address until recently, but it also forces them to clarify their relationship to the parastate of "Rojava", further complicating relations with Turkey.

But the bulk of foreign fighters are Iraqi and other Shiites fighting under Iranian command. Their presence has been quoted as a major security threat by Israel. However, their military capacities are rather a nuisance than a threat for the Jewish state. Here the Iraqi government started already to assert its authority by forbidding members of the People's Mobilisation Units to fight in Syria and thus reduces the pool of fighters for Tehran.

The periodically published Fact Sheet compiles and analyzes significant developments pertaining to the Syrian conflict while providing maps and an outlook of possible future events.

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SOURCES: MEDIA ANALYSIS; LAYOUT: REF III/Medien, IMG



INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

28.11.: The eleventh round of the Astana talks between Turkey, Russia and Iran were the shortest so far and ended without major agreements. During the fourth Astana Format summit in Sochi on 14/02, the Adana Agreement, which prohibits PKK activities in Syria, was put in the foreground.

16.12.: Sudanese president al-Bashir visited Syria as first Arab head of state since the beginning of the war.

19.12.: Trump declared that the US would withdraw its 2,000 troops. Two days later Erdoğan delayed the Turkish military offensive in northern Syria. By 22/02 the Pentagon proclaimed that a residual peacekeeping force of around 400 soldiers would stay and be split between al-Tanf and the north of Syria.

27.12.: The UAE re-opened its embassy in Syria.

07.01.: US National Security Advisor Bolton arrived in Turkey to talk about the security of the Kurdish fighters after the alleged US withdrawal. On 10/01 Turkey's foreign minister Çavuşoğlu threatened with an offensive against the Kurds, before the US and Turkey started discussions about the creation of a 32 kilometer long safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

22.01.: Syria's UN envoy al-Jaafari called upon the UNSC to take measures to stop Israel's frequent attacks on Syrian territory and threatened with a retaliatory attack, as Iran had previously done.

28.01.: Damascus and Tehran signed a number of economic deals including agreements on banking cooperation and memorandums of understanding addressing education, housing and public services amongst others.

28.01.: The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) co-chair paid a visit to Washington in order to ensure the safety of Syria's northeast after the US-withdrawal.

07.02.: Work on the roadmap for Manbij has accelerated according to Turkey. Joint US-Turkish patrols are ongoing, while the US and Turkey are negotiating about securing Manbij.

17.02.: Trump threatened that hundreds of IS fighters would be set free, if the European allies refused to take them back. The SDF denied this, but called upon Europe and other countries to prosecute ISIS detainees.

17.02.: After the head of the Syrian National Security Office visited Cairo on 24/12 and the new UN special envoy Pedersen visited Cairo on 28/01, the co-chairman of the SDC even spoke about the possibility of Egyptian deployment east of the Euphrates.

25.02.: Assad made his first public visit to Iran since the beginning of the war.

27.02.: Russia and Israel agreed to set up a working group with other countries in order to remove all foreign forces from Syria.

28.02.: Russia and the UN have overcome disagreements over the Syrian constitutional committee. The formation shall be in the final stage. Before, Assad had announced that he would not negotiate about the constitution with the Turkish-backed opposition.

04.03.: The Saudi Foreign Minister indicated that Saudi Arabia would not restore its diplomatic ties with Syria yet. This came one day after Syria was present at a meeting of Arab states in Amman for the first time since 2011. Furthermore, the EU sanctioned the seven new Syrian ministers, who had been appointed on 29/11.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

03.12.: The Syrian regime accused the US-led coalition of targeting Syrian army sites in the eastern Homs province.

07.12.: The US denied the Turkish request to abandon its new military observation posts in northern Syria.

14.12.: The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fully captured Hajin in Deir ez-Zour province from ISIS.

18.12.: Russian Defence Minister Shoygu stated that Russia finished the withdrawal of its main forces from Syria except from Hmeimim Airbase and Tartus Naval Base. Additionally, Russia had severely reduced military flights over Syria from 100 per day to four per week.

10.01.: HTS has boosted its presence in Idlib since the beginning of December and ousted Turkey affiliated rebel organizations and others. HTS was said to control at least 75% of Idlib.

17.01.: Macron announced that the troops from France would stay in northeastern Syria to counter the ISIS threat.

20.01.: After Israel attacked Iranian ammunition depots near Damascus (29/11, 25/12), Israel again hit Iranian targets, claiming victims.

24.02.: The SDF handed 280 Iraqi and other foreign ISIS fighters over to Iraq. An alleged agreement foresees the transfer of about 500 detainees altogether.

27.02.: Within the last 10 days the Syrian army had intensified the air strikes on Idlib, especially on towns along the Damascus-Aleppo international road.

01.03.: The SDF with US air support started their operation in the last IS holdout in Baghouz, after many had surrendered and most civilians were evacuated to al-Hol camp. Around 90 people, among whom 2/3 children, have died while fleeing since December.

04.03.: The Syrian Air Force carried out airstrikes against ISIS in al-Sukhna, east of Palmyra. Combing operations started on 15/02, another on 26/02 in order to eliminate remaining ISIS cells in the deserts between Palmyra and Deir ez-Zour.

08.03.: Turkey and Russia started joint patrols around Idlib. In line with the agreement, Russia would patrol outside the demilitarized zone, whereas Turkey would be present inside.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

04.11.: The Cabinet of Syria approved a comprehensive development strategy for Aleppo province, addressing economic, service, tourist, educational and other aspects.

29.11.: Assad swore in seven new ministers, among them the Interior Minister. He issued further legislative decrees as No. 19, establishing the National Reconciliation Agency.

03.12.: A budget of almost 9 bln US dollars for 2019 was approved by the People's Assembly, 1/3 shall be allocated to investment projects.

11.12.: The General Command of the Syrian Armed Forces announced the demobilization of conscripted officers having completed five years of compulsory service. It's the second order of this kind as the war declines.

11.02.: HTS drove out activists, opponents that had vital positions in the service sector like the local council or police department, from areas it controls in Idlib.

17.02. The US threatened to end cooperation with the SDF, if they made a deal with Assad. Previously the Kurds had hoped to make a political deal with the Syrian government because of the alleged US withdrawal.

18.02.: The Lebanese Refugees Minister visited Damascus to discuss the facilitation of return of Syrian refugees. According to the Lebanese government about 110,000 refugees (the UNHCR estimated the number to be only a few tens of thousands) came back to Syria from Lebanon in 2018. Since the Nassib border's opening last October, 13,780 Syrian refugees have returned from Jordan by 27/02.

19.02.: As decided by Syria and Russia, two humanitarian corridors were opened in order to evacuate the 50,000 civilians in al-Rukban Camp in al-Tanf area.

19.02.: Although the Kurdish-led authority had presented a road map for a deal with Assad, a senior adviser to Assad rejected the idea of granting Kurds autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan.

07.03.: The UN delivered aid to Manbij, for the first time through government held area, to meet the needs of 50,000 people.



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