

## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- Egypt brokered a new ceasefire agreement for a de-escalation zone in the Eastern Ghouta region near Damascus. Similar ceasefire agreements have been made for Homs and the South-West of Syria. Despite the agreement, regime forces have hit Ghouta and Homs several times.
- Russia has announced the establishment of an operations room in Amman monitoring the de-escalation agreement in southwestern Syria.
- Israel is concerned about the presence of pro-Iranian militias near to its borders and has demanded a 60km buffer zone. An Israeli airstrike hit a Syrian military position in Masyaf, Hama province, which claimed to be a production facility for chemical weapons allegedly operated jointly by Iran and Syria.
- Turkey has sent approximately 7000 heavily armed soldiers to Kilis, which faces the mainly Kurdish enclave of Afrin. Ankara is considering a military operation in Afrin against the YPG. In response, the Kurds formed a new force to

defend Afrin.

- A “deconfliction zone” was established by Russia in Tell Rifaat, east of Afrin to prevent clashes between YPG and Turkey-supported militias. SDF units handed over the control of the zone to the Syrian Army and Russian military police.
- Three rival Syrian opposition groups met in Riyadh to establish a unified front ahead of the Geneva peace talks in October. The UN envoy to Syria outlined a new timeline for the peace process with the goal of “serious negotiation” between the Assad regime and a unified opposition. De Mistura also called for a nationwide ceasefire and urged the opposition to accept their defeat of the Syrian war.
- The sixth round of Astana talks concluded with the agreement to establish the fourth de-escalation zone in the province Idlib. Turkey, Iran and Russia would deploy observers, while the exact area of the zone remains unclear.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

- Syrian opposition reorganized itself in the south of Syria: 25 FSA-close groups joined the National Front to Liberate Syria. This occurred in the context of the US support to rebels in their fight against the Regime.
- HTS dissolved itself after fighting with Jaysh al-Islam in the eastern Ghouta, which was also blamed by the residents for repeated armistice violations.
- Opposition groups, including the powerful Salafi groups Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam formed a “Revolutionary Ministry of Defense” and a “National Army”.

- Representatives of all Kurdish groups decided on a new administrative structure which provides for 6 cantons in the 3 regions of al-Jazira, Euphrates and Afrin. Future cities freed by the IS, such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour, are to be administered by a local council, which decides whether to join Kurdish federalism.
- The first international trade fair since 2011 took place in Damascus. Iran recently signed an agreement to rehabilitate sections of Syria’s electricity infrastructure, reifying the growing Iranian role in Syria’s economy.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

- A ceasefire agreement between Ahrar-Al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir-Al-Sham (HTS) ended the crisis in the province of Idlib. The Al-Qaida linked HTS’s military presence may pose difficulties for the implementation of the de-escalation zone in Idlib.
- Regime forces have made large gains against IS in Deir ez-Zour, while US-backed SDF forces have advanced there as well, following operation “Jazeera storm”. They do not anticipate clashing with regime forces there unless in need of retaliation.
- IS has retreated from several villages in Hama, allowing government troops

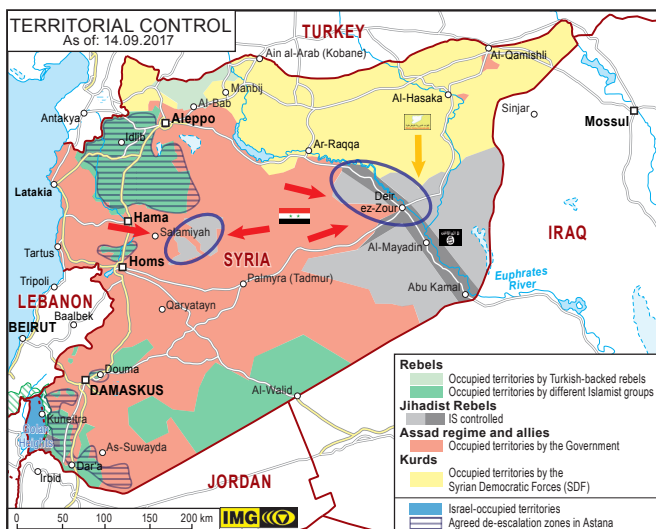
- to secure a number of areas and thus edging them closer to victory in Hama.
- Progress has been made in Raqqa with the capture of the Old City giving the SDF nearly 65% control of the city.
- Hezbollah brokered a ceasefire allowing al-Qaida-linked Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) fighters and civilians safe passage from the Syrian-Lebanese border towards Idlib leading to the release of Hezbollah fighters. The US-led coalition conducted airstrikes to block an evacuation convoy of 17 buses carrying IS operatives from Lebanon to Abu Kamal, close to the Iraqi border. The US is not party to the evacuation deal brokered by IS and Hizbollah and Regime.

## HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

- A US-led coalition attack of IS resulted in the death of at least 70 civilians. Amongst the casualties were 7 Syrian “white helmets” soldier. Amnesty International accused the Coalition of conducting „indiscriminate“ and „disproportionate“ airstrikes. The UN called for a humanitarian pause to facilitate the evacuation of about 25000 civilians from the city.
- UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria said they had evidence that the Syrian Airforce was behind the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhun in April. Previously, Carla Del Ponte, a renowned war crimes prosecutor, resigned due to obstructions placed in the way of Syrian war crimes’ prosecutions by the UN

and Russia.

- The recent takeover of the Syrian province of Idlib by HTS has created a dilemma for the US and other countries that send humanitarian aid to civilians. Humanitarian groups fear aid is being diverted to terrorist groups, but cutting off the aid could lead to a humanitarian crisis among the estimated 2 million civilians.
- As many as 300 former IS members, many of them Saudis, have fled to Syria’s Idlib province in recent weeks, with many attempting to cross into nearby Turkey.



## MAP ANALYSIS

The IS’ presence largely remains in the important strategic areas along the Euphrates, where it sits in Deir-ez-Zour, Al-Mayadin and Abu Kamal, and Salamiyah in the East of Hama. The Syrian Army and their allies has advanced to Deir-ez-Zour and Salamiyah from different fronts as shown by the arrows, while the US-backed SDF forces have also begun manoeuvring towards Deir ez-Zour from the south of the Kurdish region in northern Syria. The encircled areas are the two most important Hotspots at present.

## FORECAST

Both the US-led coalition with the SDF and the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance are now consolidating their resources in a race for strategic areas in eastern Syria, including the Baghdad-Damascus highway and the oil fields on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. The SDF actions will depend on the progress of the regime forces and their allies. They will likely try to seize the Omar oil fields and avoid direct confrontation with pro-regime forces in the area. The SAA and allies are preparing for a possible operation to cross the Euphrates River. According to UN special envoy De Mistura remaining IS strongholds are expected to fall by the end of October.

SOURCES MEDIA ANALYSIS COMPILED BY IFK MENA-Team (Jasmina RUPP, Nasser EL-HAJ, Maya HADAR)  
LAYOUT: REF III/Medien, IMG

## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- The attempts to persuade the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to postpone the **referendum on independence** have failed thus far. Turkey, Iran, US, EU, the Arab League and the UN called it a **breach of Iraq's constitution** that encourages the fragmentation of Iraq. Only Israel supports its non-Arab ally.
- Prime Minister **Abadi condemned Hizbollah's evacuation deal with IS** allowing the fighters to evacuate from Lebanon to Eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border, complicating the recent achievements of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in their fight against IS.
- Following the liberation of the predominantly Turkmen town of **Tal Afar** by ISF, Turkey may provide reconstruction assistance. Furthermore, it has strengthened calls for the **transfer of control to its residents and "legitimate" Iraqi forces** rather than the Iran-backed, Shiite-dominated Popular

Mobilization Units.

- Hundreds of **IS fighters are reportedly regrouping in Libya**, in order to rebuild the caliphate from there as their territory in Syria and Iraq is shrinking.
- Numerous high-profile visits in recent months have led to a **rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iraq**, following the trip of the influential Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The establishment of a trade commission and the reopening of the Arab border crossing for the first time since 1990, would give Saudi Arabia a leading role in rebuilding the war-torn country, and allow it to reduce the influence of its rival Iran.
- **IS called its operatives to stand firm against the upcoming battles** in the Syrian and Iraqi desert. They further encouraged their militants to poison food products in markets and stores in western countries and to conduct attacks against swimming pools.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

- After a lightning conquest of ten days prime minister **Abadi declared the capture of Tal Afar** and the entire Niniveh Governorate by the ISF. Tal Afar is roughly 80km west of Mosul and has reportedly about 2,000 IS fighters. The relative ease of the operation is seen as evidence that the IS no longer prioritizes holding territory in Iraq, preferring to head underground.
- Former teachers, policemen, tradesmen and others from tribal areas still under IS control are **receiving training** close to the frontline in Iraq's west region. They will be essential to the fight against IS in this area by providing important intelligence information.

- Despite the complete recapture of Mosul and the beginning of the reconstruction, there were still several IS cells pockets active against the ISF.
- The **US-led coalition targeted the IS in Hawija**, which lies in the southwest of Iraq's Kirkuk province, killing several militants and a senior leader. Other operations by the ISF took place in Ramadi and in Diyala province in the city of Baqubah.
- The IS suicide attack in Nasiriyah, the southern Thi Qar province, which killed 84 people, has renewed fears that the IS militants are **likely to resort to guerrilla war after the collapse of their caliphate**.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

- **21 of 41 Kirkuk governorate council members voted "yes"** to participate in the Kurdish independence poll. However, Arab representatives in Kirkuk have filed an official petition with the **UN declaring their opposition**. Two Iraqi Kurdish parties, the Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group, called for it's postponement.
- The **decision for the referendum has been met with condemnations** across Iraq, with the top court ordering its **suspension**. Former Prime Minister Maliki warned against "another Israel" should the referendum take effect. Fears are growing of a civil war, and Iran has threatened to close its borders, but the Kur-

- dish President Barzani has encouraged people to vote nonetheless. Barzani warned any attempt to take over Kirkuk province would lead to repercussions.
- The Shia cleric Al-Sadr warned against the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units remaining outside state control, and has called for a non-sectarian alliance of independent technocrats.
- A number of corruption cases have plagued the country, such as that of Salehedinne's governor Jabouri and Basra's governor, Al-Nasrawi, for embezzlement respectively. The acting Sunni trade minister and the Minister of Agriculture were interrogated by Parliament about irregularities.

## HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

- Human Rights Watch (HRW) have accused the 16th Iraqi division of committing war crimes during the fighting in Mosul. This accusation was reinforced by Prime Minister Al-Abadi a few weeks later.
- Since the end of July, Iraqi authorities have issued arrest warrants for at least 15 private lawyers, on charges of IS affiliation for their past works in IS trials. HRW criticised that lawyers should not be prosecuted for doing their job as lawyers, nor should the authorities associate them with their clients.
- Thousands of civilians had to flee IS-held Afar due to intense fighting. Me-

- anwhile, the UN lamented the lack of international attention given to the ongoing yazidi genocide. Foreign Minister Jaafari asked the international community to provide assistance in collecting evidence of IS crimes in order to bring the perpetrators to justice.
- At least **7 were killed in a suicide attack** committed by IS targeting Iraqi security forces' base in northern Baghdad. IS claimed further responsibility for an attack on the Iraqi Embassy in Kabul.



## MAP ANALYSIS

Parts of the west of Iraq remains under strong influence of IS militants, where it secures control over areas along the Euphrate, predominantly in Al-Qaim, and is also involved in fighting at the Eastern border with Syria. Territorial control by IS can be found in the area Al-Hawija, encircled by the ISF and Kurdish forces.

## FORECAST

Following the successful capture of Mosul and Tal Afar by the ISF, IS fighters fear losing their last strongholds in Iraq. Families of IS fighters are reportedly fleeing to unknown destinations from the city of al-Sharbat, south of Mosul. Moreover, the city of Al-Hawija, located 55 km southwest of the petroleum-rich city of Kirkuk, is expected to be the next target of the ISF and the US-led anti-IS coalition. The remaining IS fighters consist primarily of local fighters, who will persistently fight for the last areas in Iraq. In addition, the ISF and Kurdish forces are preparing for the possible emergence of post-IS militia and are focusing on surveillance measures through border controls, checkpoints and intelligence, but also on insurrection.

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