

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- As retaliation against a recent Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) attack, Russia and Syria have conducted **air raids in Idlib and Hama** despite the agreed upon de-escalation zone. The al-Qaida linked HTS is excluded from the ceasefire agreement.
- Russia and Syria attacked all rebel groups present in Idlib, even those who are participating in the **Astana process**. Syrian opposition accused Russia of utilizing maps presented in the Astana negotiations to bomb posts of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At the UN General Assembly, foreign Minister al-Moallem designated the zones as a "temporary agreement" only.
- For the first time, **Turkish soldiers and FSA units entered Idlib** on October 7th, in order to establish the agreed upon de-escalation zone. The HTS has reportedly joined reconnaissance mission in **Sheikh Barakat**, an area overlooking the Kurdish province of **Afrin** and the rebel-held parts of

the Aleppo province. The deployment presumably aims to **guarantee that the area is protected from Russian and regime bombing** but also to control the Kurdish province of Afrin. Syria's foreign minister supported the de-escalation zone, yet criticized the Turkish presence there.

- **Mutual recrimination between the US and Russia** regarding the attacks from militias supported by the respective sides in the fight against IS in Deir ez-Zour have increased. Russia accused the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of opening the dams to prevent the crossing of the Euphrates by pro-regime forces.
- US is expected to actively contribute to an **increasing forced movement of IS fighters to Deir ez-Zour** by reducing air raids in Western Iraq. In a meeting between US and Russian generals, incidents' avoidance measures were discussed.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

- **"Rebuild Syria"** Exhibition addressing the country's reconstruction process was held in mid-September under the patronage of the Syrian Government. The rebuilding of Syria has been estimated by the government to cost up to \$500 Billion.
- A deal between the Syrian government and IS allowed the **evacuation of hundreds of civilians** from an IS-held territory in eastern **Hama** to rebel held areas in Hama and Idlib.
- In mid September, Syrian Kurds voted in Kurdish-led regions in northern Syria to set up new governing institutions and boost regional autonomy.
- **The Kurds' goal of securing autonomy** (as part of a decentralized Syria) **is opposed by the Syrian government, Turkey and the US**. The Syrian regime accepted the possibility of autonomy for the Kurds and stated that it is negotiable as soon as the IS is defeated.

- **The SDF announced the formation of a civil council in the Deir ez-Zour** province, which was rejected by the head of the previous local council of Deir ez-Zour and by member of the opposition led Syrian Interim Government.

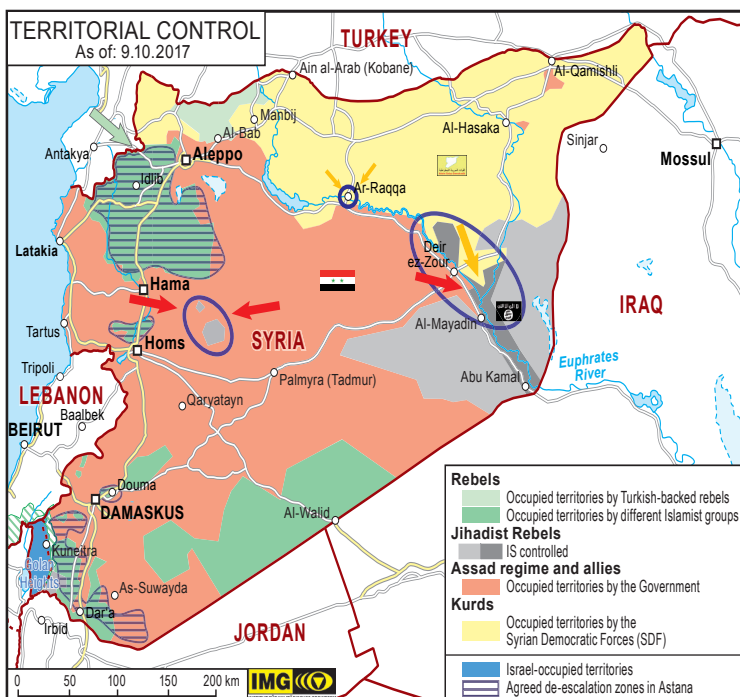
- **A military zone in the Jabel al-Sheikh area of Quneitra was announced**, allowing civilians limited time to leave the area. This occurs a day after the Quneitra Command Council terminated the southern de-escalation zone following increasing violations by pro-government forces.
- **The HTS announced Abu Mohammad al-Jolani as its new leader**. Recent changes in personnel are likely the result of severe blows that the organization suffered due to Russian airstrikes. Lately, Russia claimed that Jolani was critically injured in an air raid.
- **Opposition group Kataib Ibn Taymiyyeh broke from HTS** and clashed over control of Daret Izza in rural Aleppo.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

- **Russian airstrikes targeted HTS headquarters in Idlib**. The airstrikes were executed in retaliation following an attack on Russian military policemen who were monitoring the implementation of the de-escalation agreement.
- **Turkish forces and HTF fighters exchanged fire** near the village of Kafr Lusin on the Syrian-Turkish border.
- In the area between Palmyra and Deir ez-Zour, IS' comprehensive counter-attack aimed at taking control of the rural area east of Palmyra also resulted in the seizure of several gas fields. Yet, Syrian forces were able to contain IS' attempt to capture the vital logistics route between Deir ez-Zour and Palmyra. The offensive, during which Russia fired cruise missiles from its "Admiral

Essen" frigate, demonstrated the **Syrian Army's limited capacities** and the intense Russian involvement on the ground, evident by the death of the Russian commander of Syria's 5th Corps of volunteers caused by an IS mortar fire near Deir ez-Zour.

- In Deir ez-Zour, regime forces advanced southward along the Euphrates valley and captured, according to regime sources, the city of al-Mayadin.
- The SDF emphasised that the **capture of Raqqa from IS was in its final stages as 80% of the city was already seized**. US-backed SDF forces negotiated an evacuation deal for the remaining IS fighters.
- **IS claimed responsibility for bombing a Damascus police station** killing at least 17 people and injuring as many as 20 officers and civilians.



MAP ANALYSIS

Intensive fighting in Deir-ez-Zour along the Euphrates river remains, with the Syrian Army continuing advancements from the northwestern direction, while the SDF is advancing from the north. Attacking the IS from multiple fronts will put the terrorist group under pressure. In Homs, pro-regime forces continue to target IS militants from all directions as the latter's military influence largely diminishes. While the Kurdish SDF forces continue to engage in battle in Raqqa with IS encircled, various reports indicate that Turkish troops entered Idlib to implement the de-escalation zone and to occupy the frontlines with the Kurdish controlled canton of Afrin.

FORECAST

IS is constantly losing territory in the Euphrates valley. The Syrian army is preparing to launch an attack against one of the last remaining IS controlled pocket in Qaryatayn. The territorial losses of IS in eastern Syria may lead the group to conduct terrorist attacks in western Syria. The latest developments in Idlib and Damascus proved that IS sleeper cells are still very effective.



INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

- Outspoken opposition to **Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum** of September 25: Whereas the EU warned that the referendum will be counterproductive and that independence should be explored through a peaceful and constructive dialogue with Baghdad, the UN alerted that the vote could hamper the fight against the Islamic State (IS), in which Kurdish forces have played a critical role.
- **Turkey and Iran described the vote as illegal** and unacceptable and launched numerous retaliatory measures against the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG): Iran closed its borders and stopped importing/exporting oil products from/to Iraqi Kurdistan, Baghdad demanded all countries to suspend their air traffic with Kurdistan, whereas Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan followed this call.
- Turkey carried out **joint military maneuvers** with the Iraqi army near its border. The Iranian Revolution Guards and army also conducted military exercises near the Kurdish border, thereby threatening Kurdistan. President

Erdogan threatened Kurdistan with military maneuvers similar to those taken against the Kurds in northern Syria.

- Though repeatedly expressed, **Turkey hasn't carried out its threat to boycott Kurdish oil**. Hundreds of thousands of barrels a day reach the world market via Turkey. The Turkish Minister of Economic Affairs opposed economic actions against the KRG, stating that it is a major hurdle for Turkey as a regional hub for financial and commercial transactions. **Putin** stated that **no one would benefit from such an embargo as oil prices would be pushed up**. The gas pipeline planned by Rosneft, which will supply gas from Kurdistan via Turkey to Europe in 2020 certainly plays a relevant role as well.
- A new **Audio message** from IS-Kalif Baghdadi was published, hereby disproving rumors surrounding his death, called for the endurance of IS fighters in Syria and Iraq and ultimately motivated IS sympathizers worldwide to carry out terror attacks in the West.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

- **Polling** took place in the three provinces in the province of **Kirkuk** which is disputed yet claimed by the Kurds. Kurdish leaders said that although the referendum isn't binding it is meant to legitimate a mandate to negotiate secession. **Final referendum results showed nearly 93% in favor of independence and 7.3% against**. More than 3.3 million people, 72% of the eligible voters took part in the ballot.
- **Iraq's prime minister denounced the referendum** as "unconstitutional" and refused to discuss its results. Abadi also stated that internal issues in the Kurdish region will increase with calls for separation.
- Baghdad piles pressure on Iraqi Kurds to reverse overwhelming independence vote, as parliament urged the Iraqi central government to send troops to take control of vital oil fields held by Kurdish forces in an isolation attempt. The central government imposed additional restrictions on the autonomous region, sanctioning Kurdish banks, halting foreign currency

transfers and flights to the region and turned off mobile phones' communication networks.

- Kurdish parliamentarians is close to ending **boycott** of Iraqi parliament and will resume attendance of sessions after nearly two weeks of boycott over Iraq's rejection of Kurdistan independence vote.
- KRG in northern Iraq announced its intention to hold **presidential and parliamentary elections on Nov. 1**. The move threatens to further inflame tensions with Baghdad and neighboring countries.
- **Iraq MPs fired Kirkuk governor** over Kurdish independence vote. A few days earlier, the Iraqi Parliament voted against planned Kurdish non-binding referendum.
- Whereas **Bagdad plans to reopen old pipeline bypassing Iraqi Kurdistan territory**, Turkey confirmed plans to create a new and direct border crossing avoiding the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

- Iraqi Kurds and Turkmen clashed in oil-rich **Kirkuk** a week before the controversial independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan was held. Kirkuk's extensive Turkmen and Arab inhabitants largely oppose the inclusion of the city in the vote.
- In response to Iraqi troop movements, the **Kurdish military forces blocked roads connecting Mosul to the Kurdish regions**. KRG's Security Council justified this action with the deployment of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) near Kirkuk as a result of the independence referendum in the controversial parts of the country.
- Although the Prime minister's office denied a **planned attack on Kurdish territory**, the ISF and Popular Mobilisation Forces marched near the controversial province of Kirkuk to Bashir and Taza Khurmatu - mainly

Shiite Turkmen areas - deploying tanks and heavy artillery a few days later.

- **Twelve IS suicide attackers were killed** in clashes with paramilitary troops in **Mossul**. IS continues to pose a security threat even three months after the group was defeated in the city. Iraq's security forces have successfully regained control over the city of Anah in northern Anbar province which was previously controlled by IS.
- On September 21, the Iraqi forces started a **battle against the IS bastion of Hawija**, the last IS-enclave between Baghdad and Mosul. The military campaign was successful, mainly due to the small number of IS operatives deployed in the area, with Iraq's prime minister confirming victory.
- **IS undertook an offensive** to gain control over areas around **Ramadi**, west of Baghdad but failed.



MAP ANALYSIS

The ISF have recaptured a large part of the Hawija District, west of Kirkuk, although IS still holds some control over the area south of Hawija city. The Kurds hold the majority of northern Iraq with little signs of this changing in the near future, yet the future of Kirkuk remains unclear. The Iraqi government continues to battle IS militants in the area between Al-Qaim and Haditha along the Euphrates River making only little progress.

FORECAST

The ISF will continue to take control of the western part of Anbar Province. The deployment of ISF near Kirkuk is considered to be a direct aggression against Kurdistan, a military escalation could usher in a new civil war and cause new devastating consequences for the stability of the country. From a Kurdish/pro-Barzani perspective, the referendum might also serve Barzani as a distraction from numerous economic and political challenges Kurdistan is facing.

