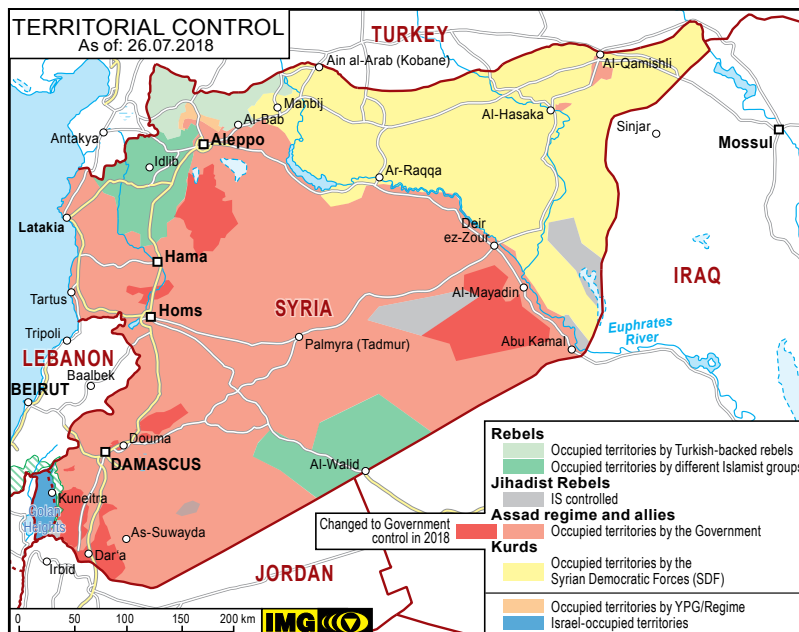


With the approval of the US, Israel, and Jordan that the Assad regime and Russia will take action against rebel groups in Deraa (which the former had supported for years), further elements of the post-war order in Syria are emerging. From an American point of view, Russia is seen as the organizing and stabilizing power in Syria that should ensure a reduced Iranian influence. Assad's staying in power is no longer in question. With the foreseeable end of the war Russia is increasingly advocating the return of refugees and internally displaced people. Russia hopes to receive American support in this regard, reportedly promised by President Trump at the Helsinki meeting. The offensive in Idlib seems to be imminent. By ceasing humanitarian support to the province dominated by extremist groups, the US has finally withdrawn from

Idlib, leaving it to Russia and Turkey.

Early meetings between the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have been supported by the US in the fight against ISIS, and the Assad regime in Damascus also caused a stir. The talks should be seen in the context of Trump's announcement in April that the US will withdraw its soldiers from Syria. The extent to which the SDF will succeed in achieving its goal of establishing a Syrian-Kurdish autonomous region in a decentralized state remains to be seen. A Kurdish autonomous area (similar to the one in Iraq) is inconceivable for the Assad regime. The Kurds, supported by the US, currently control about a third of Syria's territory, including major oil and water sources, and are likely to use them as a bargaining chips in future negotiations.



MAP ANALYSIS

At the end of July 2018, the Syrian government controlled about two-thirds of the country's territory including all major population centers (with the exception of a few cities in the north). In the first seven months of 2018, pro-government militias have managed to occupy strategically important territories such as the eastern and southern suburbs of Damascus, the southern areas on the Jordanian and Israeli borders and the area between Homs and Hama (the latter is of great economic importance), by means of negotiated agreements and military campaigns.

FORECAST

According to Syrian state media outlets, the offensive in Idlib, the last province held by the opposition, is due to start in September. In Idlib, the regime's forces face about 70,000 (mostly jihadist) fighters. With the absence of a negotiated solution, which is becoming increasingly unlikely, the bloodiest battle is expected to result in numerous civilian casualties and in further displaced people. The UN fears a mass exodus of about 700,000 civilians and calls on Turkey to keep its borders open. Turkey, for its part, fears that the seizing of Idlib will jeopardize its control over Afrin, the Jarablus Corridor and other areas captured in recent months. According to media reports, the Kurdish YPG may take part in the Idlib offensive. Turkey described Idlib as a "red line" and threatened to leave the Astana negotiation and to arm the rebels with heavy weapons. According to opposition leaders, Turkey would also arm them with MANPADS if the Idlib offensive took place. Against this backdrop, UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura's efforts to write a new constitution for Syria will continue in September. In addition, a Syrian summit between Turkey, Russia and for the first time France and Germany, focusing on a political solution to the conflict, is planned for the coming weeks.

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

24.05.: According to Syrian state media, the state's air defence system intercepted missiles aimed at Daba/Qusayr airport near the Lebanese border. Israel is suspected to have initiated the attack as the airport is used by Hezbollah troops. Two weeks later, Russian and Syrian forces were stationed there, which was apparently not coordinated with Hezbollah and led to their protests.

19.06.: With the beginning of an offensive initiated by the regime in Deraa, the De-escalation zone (agreed upon by Russia, the US and Jordan in July 2017) was effectively rendered moot. The US seemed to have approved the offensive against rebel groups, which it supported for years, in exchange for pro-iranian military units staying away from the frontline. Jordan, which borders the opposition-held area, is especially interested in re-opening the Syrian-Jordanian border, an act that is likely to boost its weak economy.

22.06.: Turkey and the US agreed on a roadmap for Manbij, which includes the withdrawal of the kurdish YPG-militia from the city. The YPG initially denied having soldiers stationed in Manbij. The Turkish Foreign Ministry announced on 16.07 that the planned withdrawal of the YPG has not yet been completed.

26.06.: Israel destroyed a weapon's depot close to Damascus airport, allegedly used by pro-Iranian forces. Russian and Syrian aircrafts were reportedly removed from the base before the attack, indicative of a notice given to the former. In the following month, Israel attacked Iranian military positions at Nayrab airfield, close to Aleppo, which serves as an important hub for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Israel did not confirm the attacks.

10.07.: US-Secretary of State, Pompeo, indicated in an interview that the US does not see Assad's resignation as a prerequisite for a political solution in Syria. The reduction of violence and the suppression of the Iranian presence in Syria are of central importance for peace in Syria.

12.07.: After a meeting between Putin and Netanyahu, Israel agreed that Syrian authorities will return to the Syrian-Israeli border. UN-troops are also set to return to their demilitarised operational area - the Golan Heights. Russia promised to keep pro-Iranian forces 100km away from the Israeli border (however, Israel considers this proposal as insufficient) and not to react to Israeli airstrikes on Iranian facilities in Southern Syria. In return, Israel would no longer destabilise the Assad regime.

13.07.: Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, highlighted that Iranian forces would not withdraw from Iraq and Syria due to pressure from Israel or the US, but only if the Baghdad and Damascus demand so.

20.07.: Russia announced it will set working groups in order to support the return of Syrian refugees from Jordan and Lebanon to Syria. In a letter to the Pentagon following the Helsinki meeting between Trump and Putin on July 16, Russia proposed to cooperate with the US regarding repatriation of refugees and reconstruction of Syria. Washington indicated that the US will only support such measures as part of a framework for a political solution in Syria and once the safe and voluntary return of refugees is guaranteed.

02.08.: Russia temporarily deployed military police to the Golan Heights and supported the UN Blue Helmets Mission that has suspended its monitoring activities since 2012 for security reasons. In addition, Russia established 8 observation posts, which will probably be handed over to the Assad regime once the area has been stabilized.

07.08.: According to a Pentagon report, Iran operates posts in 36 Syrian bases. Pro-Iranian forces include about 3,000 Revolutionary Guards, 9,000 Hezbollah fighters and 10,000 Shiite fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

08.08.: The Chinese ambassador to Syria offered China's support restoring governmental control in Idlib. 500 to 3,000 Chinese fighters are assumed to be situated in Idlib. Military cooperation between China and Syria continues, though no Chinese military advisors or Special Forces are currently present in Syria. China has become Syria's most important trading partner, accounting for 80% of Syrian exports.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

04.06.: President Assad issued two legislative decrees stipulating raising salaries of military personnel by 30% and pensions of retired military personnel by 20%. Later that month, Assad issued further legislative decrees indicating that any constitutional reform in Syria should be decided upon in a referendum, unaffected by external powers.

18.07.: The evacuation of 7,000 people from two Shia villages (Foua and Kafra) besieged by rebels in Idlib province, was made possible as the Syrian regime released hundreds of detainees.

26.-27.06.: A meeting between the political wing of the SDF and the Assad regime took place in Damascus. The SDF, which controls more than one third of Syria, was said to be working towards a "democratic and decentralised Syria". A key negotiating point is the Kurdish aspiration for autonomy and Article 107 of the Syrian constitution, which refers to local administration. The SDF also announced that the government will be allowed to re-open and operate the Tabqa Dam in Raqqa province. In turn, the regime suggested that the areas controlled by the SDF would take part in next month's local elections.

05.08.: The Syrian cabinet approved the establishment of a center for the reception, allocation and accommodation of refugees. The center is aimed at coordinating the return of displaced Syrians and refugees from neighbouring countries to their places of permanent residence.

13.08.: Rebel groups in Idlib arrested 270 people suspected of negotiating a possible deal with the regime to prevent an offensive in Idlib.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

14.05.: Deir ez-Zour: The SDF managed to retake a village for the first time since the offensive against IS was restarted a few months ago. By the beginning of August, the SDF have gained control over all ISIS-held territories north of the Euphrates, except for several villages bordering the river. The Pentagon estimated that there are about 6,000 ISIS fighters in Syria.

16.05.: Homs: The Syrian army announced it regained control over an opposition-held territory between Homs and Hama after an evacuation deal was struck with local militias. The Homs-Hama highway, vital for the local economy, was reopened in early June.

08.06.: Idlib: Russian airstrikes in Zardana, Idlib killed 44. Russia continued its almost daily airstrikes in Idlib throughout the last months, especially in the areas close to its military bases in Latakia.

21.06.: Raqqa: SDF forces were targeted by ISIS in two IED explosions which took place in Raqqa city. Similar attacks occurred after months and years of calm again in Hasaka, Deir ez-Zor, Sweida, Palmyra and parts of Idlib.

23.06.: Deraa: For the first time in a year, Russia bombed southern Syria, marking the beginning of a military offensive in Deraa. Several southern opposition militias have joined forces in order to efficiently counter the offensive. As Jordanian-mediated peace negotiations between Russia and the rebels failed, several towns were handed over to the regime while others were militarily taken. Whereas the offensive resulted in more than 300,000 IDPs, Israel and Jordan closed their borders. With the exception of members of the White Helmets and their families, only a few managed to escape. By the beginning of August the regime had regained control over southern Syria.

11.08.: Deir ez-Zour: For the first time there were intense battles between Iranian Revolutionary Guards and pro-regime forces in the city of Abu Kamal. 25 pro-regime fighters were killed in the storming of the Revolutionary Guards headquarters. The regime fired at places held by Iranian proxies.



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