



THE YEAR IN REVIEW SYRIA 2017

The Year in Review of Syria is based on the periodical factsheets for Syria that are produced by the IFK-MENA Team at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, National Defense Academy Vienna. The Annual Review compiles and analyzes all significant events pertaining to the Syrian conflict while providing an outlook for the year 2018.

International Conflict and Crisis Management

The year 2017 marked a turning point in the seven-year history of the Syrian civil war: the terrorist militia Islamic State (ISIS) was territorially defeated by the loss of its strongholds, the opposition that tries to overthrow Assad is massively weakened and intense political negotiations between Assad's supporters - Russia and Iran - and those of the opposition - Turkey, USA and Jordan (among others) - have frozen the lines of conflict.



Putin's relationship with Assad has grown from strength-to-strength since Russia's involvement in Syria which has helped consolidate Assad's power at the helm.

Source: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/11>

Domestic Politics

Domestically, the year was dominated by the shaping of the future of Syria. Russia suggested the concept of a decentrally-organized Syria and deepened its role as an active conflict mediator in 2017.

Military Developments

On the military level, numerous offensives against ISIS led to nearly all of ISIS-held territory being reconquered by the Syrian Arab Army and its allies. The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also advanced in ISIS-held areas north of the Euphrates pushing east towards the Iraqi border. Other opposition militias re-organized. Notwithstanding the de-escalation agreements, fighting remained ongoing, especially in the northwestern provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama.

Humanitarian situation

Despite the ceasefire agreements, which at first sight promised a more hopeful future for the Syrian people, the humanitarian situation in 2017 remained tense as well. The escalation of fighting between regime forces and opposition on the one hand and air and ground operations by the US-led anti-IS coalition and the Russia-Iran-Assad alliance on the other, led to the death and displacement of many civilians. According to UNOCHA, about 13.1 million Syrian people need humanitarian aid by the end of 2017. Of these, 5.6 million are in deep danger due to evictions, battles and limited access to basic goods and services.

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



The Astana process

In early May, Russia, Iran and Turkey signed the Astana agreement, establishing four de-escalation zones (Idlib, North Hama, East Ghouta and South Syria) in which hostilities were meant to halt. The agreement reflected the commitment of the three observer states to use their influence on local groups in order to prevent fighting, suspend air strikes and allow humanitarian relief. The US which for years decided against military intervention in Syria and insisted on a diplomatic solution instead played no role in the Astana agreement and have kept its engagements limited to fighting ISIS. The Astana process, which focuses primarily on a negotiated settlement at the military level, replaced - much to the displeasure of the opposition - the UN-led peace negotiations in Geneva, which have been unsuccessful thus far.

Who benefits from the de-escalation zones?

The Astana process ultimately failed to enforce a nationwide ceasefire and improve the humanitarian situation. The de-escalation zones are not to be mistaken for safe zones and constitute a strategic decision which enabled the pro-Assad forces, in particular, to urgently relocate their troops to the front lines in the battle against ISIS. This way the regime and its allies were able to tackle ISIS-held areas in Homs, Deir ez-Zour and along the Euphrates Valley and slowed down a possible gain of influence of the US and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and build a territorial corridor from Iraq to Syria as desired by Iran and Hezbollah.

In addition, the four de-escalation zones secure the long-term influence of regional players in Syria. In southern Syria, Jordan and the US (representing Israel), called for the withdrawal of pro-Iranian forces from Israel's borders. Meanwhile, Turkey has expanded its military and political influence in northern Syria by establishing a territorial zone between Azaz and Jarablus, as well as through its observer role in the province of Idlib. Turkey's main priority remained the containment of the Syrian

branch of the Kurdish PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party). Despite a mechanism to assure compliance with the ceasefire in all zones, regular ceasefire violations occurred, particularly in Idlib, North Hama and East Ghouta zones and called into question the seriousness of the agreement. The de-escalation zones are a first step in containing the hostilities, but they do not offer a political solution. In September, the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem referred to the zones only as a "temporary agreement".

Chemical Attacks and the "new old US-strategy" for Syria

A chemical attack, which occurred in April in the rebel held city of Khan Sheikhoun, sparked direct US action against the Assad regime for the first time since the beginning of the Syrian war. Yet, contrary to speculation about a new US strategy in Syria, the attack did not mark the beginning of a major US military intervention. The US' top priority in Syria remained as it was under president Obama the fight against ISIS. For this purpose, the US had supplied a wide selection of weapons and armored vehicles to the Kurdish-dominated SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), much to the dismay of Turkey, to battle ISIS in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour. Roughly 1,700 American soldiers are currently stationed in Syria.

The defeat of the armed opposition

The capture of Aleppo, the last urban stronghold of the armed opposition, by regime forces at the end of 2016 marked the failure of the revolution. After more than two years of Russian airstrikes against rebel groups, ISIS and Al-Qaeda's offshoot Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a significant number of the armed opposition has been defeated. The suspension of the CIA program to support anti-Assad rebels at the end of the year gave the last fatal blow to the armed opposition.

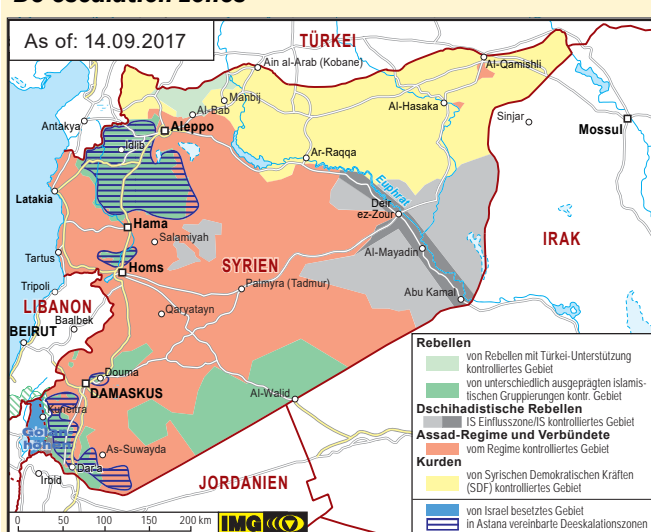
On a political level, the fragmented opposition suffered setbacks after being pressured by its supporters, mainly Saudi Arabia, to merge with less dissident opposition groups such as the Moscow and Cairo groups for the November 8th's Geneva round of negotiations and to refrain altogether from their original conditions for negotiating: Assad's immediate resignation and the release of political prisoners.

The Arab Gulf States, long-time supporters of the opposition, were completely excluded from the Astana process and were thus forced to abandon their unrealistic targets of a regime crash. Consequently, they had to pursue new strategic objectives in Syria, most probably rebuilding devastated Sunni Arab territories. Peace and stability have become much more important to the Syrian people than the demand for power and political order.

Turkey's engagement in Syria

In 2017, Turkey tried in vain to persuade the US to give up its support for PKK-affiliated groups in northern Syria (YPG/SDF) and instead position Turkey-loyal opposition forces in the fight against ISIS. At the same time Turkey and Russia tried to identify common interest in Syria to make the de-escalation agreement in the last fully rebel-

De-escalation zones



An agreement in Astana was signed to establish four de-escalation zones aimed towards the cessation of hostilities between rebel groups and forces loyal to Assad.

Layout: IMG, Source: IFK

held province of Idlib work. However, Turkey did manage to surround the hostile Kurdish enclave of Afrin through its long lasting control over the so-called "Jarablus Corridor" (since 2016) and its observer post to maintain the ceasefire in Idlib. All these actions indicate that Turkish military action in Syria is likely to continue in 2018.



The Astana Conference created the parameters in which Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to establish four de-escalation zones in which hostilities were meant to halt.

Source: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2017/12/>

Iran - the "winner" of the Syrian war

Iran, with its ally Hezbollah, can be considered victorious in the Syrian conflict. Pro-Iranian militias and Hezbollah successfully launched offensives against rebel forces and ISIS and have massively expanded their influence. Israel is particularly concerned with the presence of pro-Iranian militias near its borders and the Israeli air force has repeatedly bombed convoys carrying arms, weapons depots and factories on Syrian territory.

Russia, as a mediator and ceasefire observer, is not willing to take action and prevent the presence of its ally Iran in the border area. Thus, the new buffer zone plan from November 8th only covers a width of 5-7 km instead of 60 km as required by Israel. Israel fears that this will allow pro-Iranian forces to settle in southwestern Syria indefinitely. The Lebanese Hezbollah could particularly use the area along the Golan Heights as a new base and launch offensives against Israel.

Zones of influence of external powers

Also in 2017, the zones influence of external powers were solidified, especially through the establishment of military bases. Russia began modernizing and expanding its naval base in Tartus and has collaborated with the YPG in a Russian-Kurdish training camp in Afrin.

Next to Iran, Russia is the other "winner" in the Syrian conflict. Through its naval base, Russia was able to secure long-term access to the Mediterranean. In addition, Russia was able to benefit from numerous arms supply contracts and strengthen its position as a relevant international actor.

The recent announcement by the Russian president Putin regarding the withdrawal of a significant portion of Russian troops from Syria may be seen as a re-focusing

of Russian forces to western Syria, where they must support the Assad regime's reconquest of the last fully rebel-held province of Idlib, as well as securing their own military base in Latakia.

During 2017, the US has expanded its bases in the Kurdish areas of Rmelan, Kobane and Hasaka, mostly to prevent a resurgence of ISIS and to contain Iran's influence in Syria. While Turkey reportedly established its base in the ISIS-liberated city of al-Bab, the United Kingdom built a military base in the Jordanian-Syrian-Iraqi border area in al-Tanf and Iran has operation facilities in Aleppo, Hama and in southwest Damascus. All these states will play a key role in the negotiations for the political and territorial future of Syria.

Forecast 2018

Although a political solution to the Syrian conflict is currently more foreseeable than ever before, new hostilities could set off in 2018. Clashes between the US-backed Kurds and the Assad-Iran-Russia alliance are particularly possible in the light of the diminishing ISIS caliphate. Public threats to seize the city of Raqqa have already been made by the regime. The Kurdish occupation of parts of the resource-rich province of Deir ez-Zour is also a thorn in the side of the Assad regime; The Kurds are not likely to give up those areas without a significant compensation, such as autonomy concessions. Currently, however, Syrian Kurdistan's total independence is being rejected, both internally and externally. The failure of the Kurds to participate in the Geneva, Astana and Sochi negotiations at the instigation of Turkey, makes the possibility of reaching a political solution more complicated as Kurdish forces control 25% of Syria's territory. The relationship between the US and Turkey, its NATO partner, will remain tense. The extent of the American support of the YPG/SDF following ISIS' collapse remains to be seen. US bases in the Kurdish area could serve as a natural shield for the YPG.

The post-conflict phase in Syria will continue in 2018. Diminished fighting would make room for reconstruction and urge the regime to seek financial support for such purpose. Russia, unlike Iran or China, proves to be less of a reliable partner, as it is not able to offer financial support needed for such reconstruction. In the Syrian post-conflict phase, Russia will thus need to seek new allies, perhaps Western ones, to maintain its long-term center of gravity in Syria as well as its pressure on Assad.

Kurdish autonomy aspirations

Moscow intensified its cooperation with the Kurds in Afrin and submitted a draft constitution for a federal autonomous region of Kurdistan within a decentralized Syria to Damascus. In addition to the three cantons of Jazira, Afrin and Euphrat in northern Syria, the SDF expanded their control in the newly-conquered territories by establishing local civil councils. These newly conquered territories are mainly populated by Arabs, which may lead to tensions after ISIS as mutual opponent is defeated.

At the same time, inner-Kurdish tensions exist, mainly due to the difference of interests and international influence, especially of Turkey and Iraq. Last spring members of the Kurdish Yekiti Party were arrested. Here the PYD, a sister party of the PKK, played a crucial role, as the offensive of the Turkish Army against the PKK in Turkey made northern Syria a place of refuge for them. The elections which took place in September in areas under SDF control constitute yet another step towards Kurdish autonomy. However, the idea of full independence from Syria was rejected by both the external supporters of the SDF and by the main regional powers. Even with ISIS' diminished territorial control in Syria, fulfilment of the Kurdish autonomous aspirations seem unlikely.

Amnesty- and Evacuation Agreements

The regime's amnesty ordinances, granting impunity to anyone who laid down his weapons and turned himself in represent another step towards national reconciliation. A direct political rapprochement between opposition militias and regime forces was not barely noticeable in 2017. Russia, which has acted as a facilitator, though, has been able to make a few local-level agreements through communication channels, which prevented further military escalation. As in 2016, numerous evacuation agreements were negotiated, in particular with rebel-controlled enclaves near Damascus and Homs, allowing the withdrawal of rebels from regime-controlled areas to Idlib. In return, civilians, mostly from Shia-villages in rebel areas were able to relocate to regime-held territory. As in the past, these steps were heavily criticized

and it was argued that they constitute an act of ethnic cleansing, which influence ethnic and religious distribution in the country. Moreover, two such evacuation agreements were negotiated with ISIS; one agreement made the withdrawal of ISIS militants and their relatives from the Syrian-Lebanese border region to Deir ez-Zour possible, whereas another secured the withdrawal of the remaining ISIS fighters and their relatives from Raqqa to Deir ez-Zour in mid-October, when the battle of Raqqa was de-facto over.

A new Constitution for Syria

The Russian initiative to draft a new constitution for Syria started with the invitation of a few minor opposition groups to Moscow in early February. The main themes in the draft are the future of the presidency and the organization of the state in terms of possible decentralization. Several opposition-groups criticized the Russian constitution proposal arguing that the process of drafting a constitution has to take place in Syria and should not be influenced by foreign actors. In addition, they oppose a secular state. This constitution drafting process came to a standstill in the second half of 2017.

After the termination of hostilities, a new constitution will play a central role in the peace and reconciliation process, as it will not only determine the future of Assad, but will also define the structure of the local administration. Some administrative autonomy at the local level will probably be the main demand of various opposition groups.

The Syrian Opposition

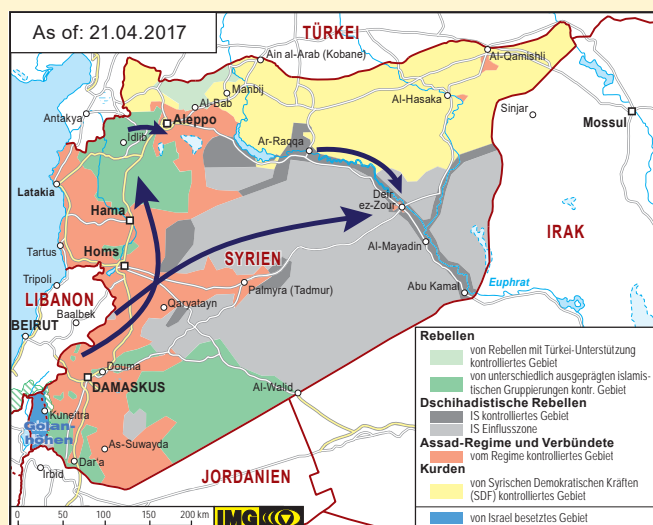
Through Turkey's political and military engagement in northern Syria, the structure of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) has been maintained in the territorial corridor between al-Bab, Jarabulus and Azaz. Whereas the control of border crossings is an important part of SIG's income, the SIG will not be viable in the long run without Turkey's financial support.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has formed several new militias in the province of Deraa, including the National Front to Liberate Syria. However, the FSA was unable to make any significant military and political progress there.

The development in the opposition scene as well as its political and military influence remain strongly dependent on the support of external actors, above all Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but also the US, France and UK. Much of the influence from outside has already been successively reduced or completely discontinued throughout 2017.

The merger of several opposition militias into HTS, whose main fraction is the Syrian al-Qaida offshoot Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, has changed the political and military situation in the province of Idlib. By taking over the provincial capital, HTS strengthened its political as well as its military position. HTS now faces the decision to completely distance itself from the parent organization al-Qaida and by doing so avoiding anti-terror measures by external powers, or to fill the jihadist vacuum left by ISIS after its military defeat. The arrest of al-Qaida supporters by HTS at the end of November could be seen as a sign of cutting ties to al-Qaida irrevocably. In an audio-message from Ayman al-Zawahiri the head of al-Qaida, published the next day he stated that HTS is not a part of his organisation.

Evacuation Agreements



Since 2014, more than 14 'evacuation agreements' have been made between the Syrian government and armed opposition groups to help civilians and fighters flee conflict zones. The most prominent evacuations occurred from enclaves close to the Lebanese border towards Idlib and Deir ez-Zor, from Idlib to Aleppo and from Raqqa to Deir ez-Zor.

Layout: IMG, Source: IFK



The Syrian Parliament is being addressed by Assad in July 2017, after the Chair of the Parliament, Dr Hadia Abbas, was fired for allegedly being 'undemocratic'.

Source: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170722-syrian-parliament-ousts-its-own-chair/>

The political elite in Damascus did not undergo any major changes in 2017. The inner circle around Assad remained as it was. Three new ministerial posts, those for Justice, Public Administration and Economy & Trade have been re-staffed.

Forecast

Domestically, the next few years in Syria will depend heavily on the future of president Assad. The fact that Assad will remain at the helm, according to current indications, may com-

plicate a reconciliation process with many opposition groups, as Assad stands for the old establishment and is also responsible for the death of tens of thousands of Syrians.

Kurdish autonomy within a decentralized Syria could and may likely be the case, but a full independence from Damascus, especially after the negative precedent in neighboring Iraq, is not likely, as this plan lacks the support of Kurdish allies like the US. Assad's dealings with the various opposition groups will determine the political future of Syria. It should be noted that the SDF are given a different status than HTS or Ahrar al-Sham, since the SDF do not oppose the Syrian regime militarily. The most important factor for stability in the near future lies in the compliance with the de-escalation zones. If the ceasefire agreements are largely respected - the signs are currently pointing to the opposite - then chances are high to start a process of political reconciliation under the pretext of national dialogue and negotiations with the medium term goal of drafting a constitution followed by elections. The developments within the fractured opposition remain dependent on the involvement of foreign actors, notably Turkey, Qatar and other supporters of the opposition, such as Saudi Arabia, the US, France and the UK, in the transitional political phase following the defeat of ISIS. It is crucial how the regime in Damascus reacts, which strategy or goal is being pursued is not yet to be estimated, as history has proven that contradictory statements are made by various influential Syrian and foreign personalities respectively.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

Aleppo

In the overall context of the war, securing military success in Aleppo in January 2017 was of great strategic importance for the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) for three reasons:

- Aleppo is the urban and infrastructural center in northern Syria and is of high symbolic value
- the proximity to the Turkish border allowed a steady supply for the opposition
- the last groups of the armed opposition merged into different coalitions (the largest of them) was Jaish al-Fatah, which includes al Qaeda's offspring Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and could pose a threat to the regime through new offensives

From the regime perspective, had rebels not been defeated in Aleppo, the regime and its allies would not have been able to refocus its forces on ISIS and the Kurds. The deployment of Turkish forces to the northern province of Aleppo was not only an important symbolic move, but also presented Assad with a longterm challenge of dealing with foreign powers on his territory in conjunction with struggles against other rebel groups.

Raqqa

Securing victory for the Kurdish-dominated SDF in Raqqa was imperative given the symbolic and strategic importance of the city for ISIS. Firstly, Raqqa was the largest Syrian city under the group's control and the first area it captured before announcing it as the capital of the caliphate. Secondly, Raqqa is recognized as the financial, institutional, media and external operations center of ISIS, serving as a hub for planning overseas terror attacks.

The SAA had faced challenges on various fronts due to ISIS' occupation of Raqqa and the inability to enter Raqqa through US bombing of regime positions as a tactical warning. Nonetheless, with SDF driving ISIS out of strategically important

areas and eventually liberating Raqqa, the Kurdish-dominated militia underscored its ability to defend not only Kurdish populated areas in northern Syria but also conquer new territories, like the northern countryside of Deir ez-Zor.

Deir ez-Zour

The SAA's victory in Deir ez-Zour city underlined the crucial participation of the Russian air force and navy. Since ISIS' first arrival in Deir ez-Zour in 2014, the group has since repeatedly tried to take over what was considered the remaining Baathist stronghold in Eastern Syria, and a defeat in Deir ez-Zour would have culminated in a loss of influence in eastern Syria for Assad. In addition, the city is situated in the Euphrates valley and therefore holds great strategic importance for the region because it is situated on the main transit route to northern Iraq.

Given that the SDF were able to achieve major territorial gains in Deir ez-Zour, and the competition from various fronts to claim towns and oilfields along the Euphrates valley, it had become evident that Deir ez-Zour is of critical importance to the players involved on the ground. The province

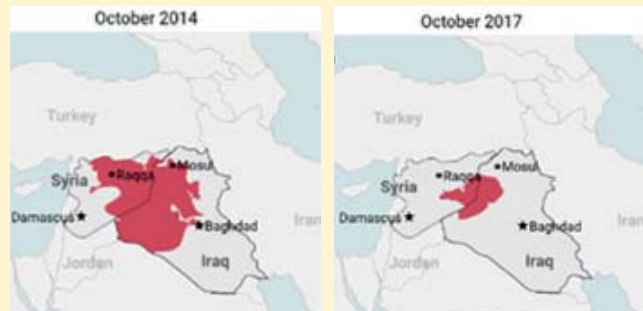
- contains rich resources that would have benefited Assad's plan for reconstruction,
- lies in close proximity to the Iraqi border and therefore has implications for Iran and Hezbollah's military ambitions towards establishing a land corridor to Iran, and
- Deir ez-Zour could potentially be the city in which ISIS and other jihadi groups resurrect, possibly impacting the role of the US in remaining in the region to prevent renewed violent escalations

The capture of the provincial capital by the Syrian Arab Army and its allies, supported by Russian air support, represents a strategically important victory for the Assad regime. Thus, the regime can now maintain the legitimacy of the Baathist party in the east as well.

Idlib

Idlib, an area largely under control of jihadist groups, became the centre of intense fighting between Ahrar al-Sham, backed by Turkey and their allies on the one hand, and HTS, a strong major opposition force controlling the region, on the other hand. In this battle for power and territorial control, HTS eventually gained the upper hand by conquering the provincial capital Idlib. For Turkey though, fighting in Idlib represented a threat of a “terror-hub” on its border with Syria, which triggered Turkey’s decision to support Ahrar al-Sham due to its own security interests. The fight-

ISIS territorial control 2014-2017



The influence of ISIS in Syria has diminished over the course of the last three years which is threatening the future of the Caliphate on the ground, although in December 2017 ISIS still holds territory between and in close proximity to the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

ting in Idlib pushed Iran, Russia and Turkey to agree, in the context of the Astana-agreement, on formally reducing the fighting between insurgents and the government in the northwest, as well as to provoke a split between Al-Qaida loyalists and other opposition groups. That said, since the province of Deir ez-Zour was largely under control of the regime, government troops and the Russian Air Force started new low-scale advances towards Idlib.

Through its observer status, Turkey was able to deploy Turkish forces around the Kurdish province of Afrin.

Homs and Hama

Considered the “capital of the revolution” against the regime, the SAA and its allies have launched an offensive in the eastern part of Homs province. The importance of this offensive was underlined by the cooperation between the SAA, Russia and Hezbollah in fighting and defeating ISIS. Despite the agreement in Cairo on a ceasefire between the SAA and rebel-group representatives it had been breached by rebel attacks by Ahrar Al-Sham’s attacks in northern Hama.

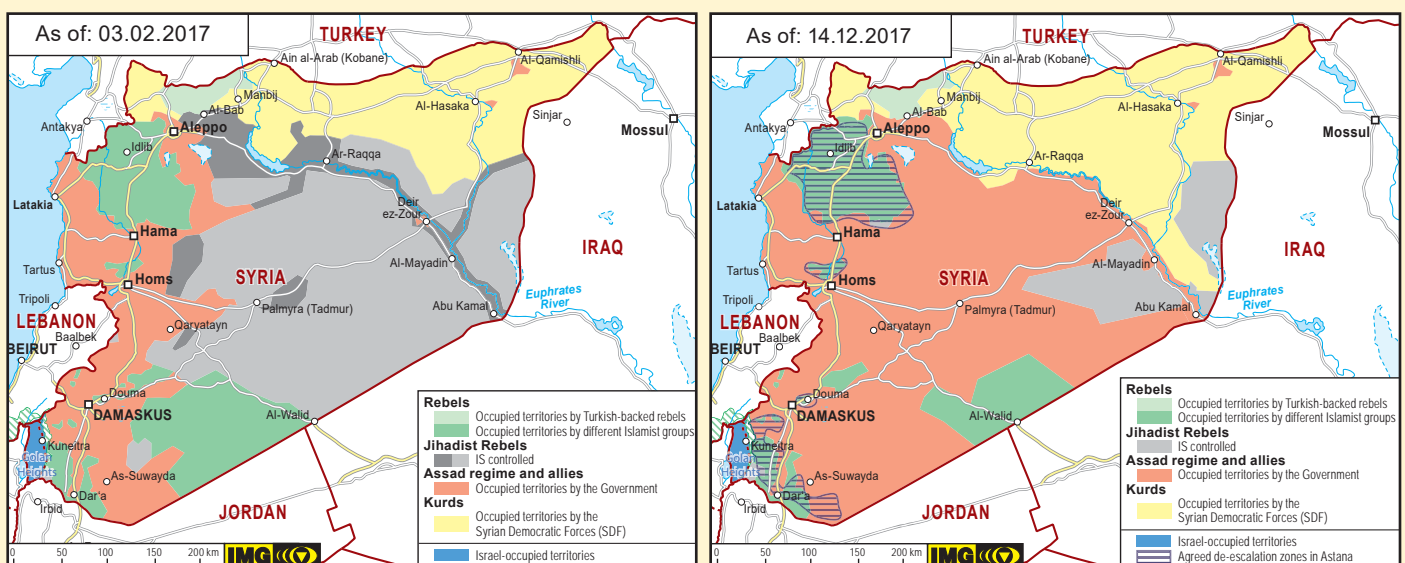
HTS’ frailties were further exposed as they launched an unsuccessful offensive against the Syrian Armed Forces north of Hama in the first half of 2017. This offensive was particularly indicative of the fact that the group was unable to maintain territorial gains for a sustained period, while the Syrian forces were greatly boosted by the intervention of Russian air support and were thus able to tighten their grip on territories. The situation in the northern Hama countryside remained tense throughout 2017, with only small territorial shiftings between the rebels and government forces.

Deraa

Despite the current presence of some anti-government militant groups and ISIS in the southern province of Deraa Quneitra and the Golan Heights, the offensive to regain control over the city of Deraa was coordinated between the SAA, Iranian-backed militias and the Russian Air Force. The importance of this offensive is characterised by a number of points:

- To obstruct the opposition from maintaining control over the strategic border crossing with Jordan.
- Symbolically, Deraa is considered the “birthplace” of the six-year old uprising.
- Army bases in Deraa were one of the main lines of defence for regime forces which they used to shell all the areas to the east of the province.
- Finally rebel controlled-areas in Deraa border the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and are thus crucial to Iran and Hezbollah.

Comparison of territorial control; February and December 2017



Military developments over the course of the last 12 months made by all competing actors have reshaped territorial control.

Layout: IMG
Source: IFK

De-escalation zones

The areas selected to form the de-escalation zones are of strategic importance. Idlib lies close to the border with Turkey and Latakia, a regime stronghold where Russia has its main air base. Idlib is also a launchpad for opposition groups against regime forces. The implementation of this zone could be hindered by rebel factions, Turkey's pressure on militant groups and the possibility of HTS - which is not part of the ceasefire agreement - capturing large parts of Idlib, or the regime itself. A ceasefire agreement and the observer function of Turkey and Russia could put pressure on opposition militias and prevent the strengthening of al-Qaeda-loyal groups, which are not part of the agreement.

Another de-escalation zone is in the centrally located province of Homs, and covers a small rebel-held area just north of the city. Iran's military presence in Homs has raised fears that Iran is using Homs as a headquarter for its forces. The Eastern Ghouta de-escalation zone is situated only 15km from Damascus and constitutes the final rebel-stronghold near the Syrian capital. Lastly, the rebel-controlled area in Southern Syria along the border with Jordan includes parts of Deraa and Quneitra provinces, is a potential launchpad for rebel attacks on Damascus. Israel has voiced concerns regarding potential attacks launched from southern Syria by Iran, Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias.

Forecast

With ISIS' influence strongly reduced and the SAA having achieved a number of territorial gains, Assad may attempt to consolidate his control of all major urban centers in the country, yet, further relying on Russian and Iranian support. The areas still to be potentially contested in 2018 are: between Sukhna and Al-Bukamal and Mayadin in the Euphrates River valley where ISIS holds large desert areas; areas controlled by rebel militants in Idlib; in the south in Daraa and as-Suweida, and closer to the south-west around at-Tanf, as well as Eastern Ghouta.

Should the Syrian Army be unable to advance to the contested areas and thus stamp their authority over the rebels, a political settlement with militant groups would need to be struck - a scenario that Assad loyalists may have to unwillingly accept. Future military developments will also depend on the sustainability of the de-escalation zones, while the possibility of further expanding the zones to other parts of the country should not be discounted. However, the current events point to a collapse of the cease-fire agreements and the capture of the last rebel-held areas by Assad forces.

In respect of the territorial sovereignty, the Assad Regime will need to convince hostile external powers like the US, UK and Turkey to leave Syrian soil in the long term. A complete withdrawal of the allied Iranian and Russian troops is unlikely.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

IDPs

In 2017, the number of IDPs in Syria exceeded 7 million people (IDMC Syria). Around 150,000 IDPs returned to eastern Aleppo in the beginning of 2017, though living conditions following the prolonged fighting in the area make the sustainability of their return doubtful. Further fighting between the SDF and ISIS in Aleppo and Idlib resulted in significant displacements of about 55,000 in Manbij during the first part of the year. 40,000 IDPs in Hama and at least 27,000 IDPs in and around besieged Eastern Ghouta and rural Damas-

cus followed due to repeated clashes between the government and non-government forces. An SDF offensive to retake Raqqa in June triggered large waves of displacement and by mid-July, only about 30,000 to 50,000 residents were estimated to have stayed in the city (out of a pre-war population of over 200,000). In September, military operations against ISIS in Deir ez-Zour resulted in over 100,000 people being displaced, mostly fleeing to other parts of the governorate. Many of those who remained in Deir ez-Zour could not be reached with humanitarian assistance due to the proximity of fighting or being in areas under ISIS control.

Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries



War-torn Syria has led to a substantial number of Syrians fleeing the country to neighbouring nations, which has put a large toll on the receiving nations to accommodate them.

Source: ATLAS Syria - BM.I, UNHCR (December 2017)

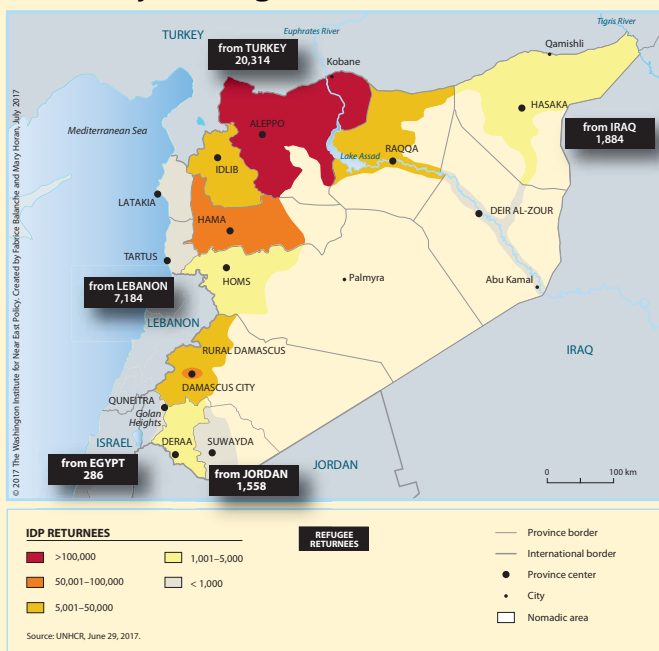
Providing humanitarian assistance to besieged areas

Throughout 2017, sieglements in Syria continued despite international outcry. The delivery of humanitarian assistance by international and local actors to several locations in the country was obstructed in the light of ongoing or renewed hostilities, shifting conflict lines, administrative impediments and deliberate restrictions on the movement of people and goods. These conditions resulted in a prolonged lack of access to humanitarian aid and an increase in food prices, which further deteriorated conditions for people living under siege.

Unexploded ordnances

The presence of landmines, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war continues to be a serious safety concern in numerous locations, especially in territories once occupied by ISIS. Consequently, mine risk education and awareness activities were provided by aid organizations in IDP camps and in host communities throughout the year. A substantial clean up of such heavily mined regions is estimated to cost millions and last for decades.

Return of Syrian Refugees



The return of refugees from neighbouring countries as well as Internally Displaced Persons has put a strain on humanitarian organizations to not only manage their returns with countries from which they are arriving from but also facilitate their integration into Syrian society.

Source: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/Syria%20Conflict/Spontaneous-returns.pdf>

De-escalation zones

Despite the establishment of several de-escalation zones across the country in May, fighting in numerous areas caused further civilian deaths and injuries and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. In August, cross-country violence continued to impact civilians despite an overall reduction of civilian casualties in areas where de-escalation zone agreements were in place.

Health services and diseases

The provision of quality health services across Syria continued to suffer from the consequences of the ongoing hostilities resulting in disrupted health systems and facilities and reduced qualified medical staff throughout the year. Whereas Polio is almost completely eradicated worldwide, and despite a mandatory vaccination campaign in Syria in 1964, the conflict has brought several outbreaks over the past years. In 2017, 23 new cases of vaccine derived polio have been confirmed, constituting the first polio outbreak in the country in 2 years. The outbreak originated in Mayadeen (Deir ez-Zour). An outbreak response plan was implemented in line with internationally-agreed protocols.

Children affected

Through UNICEF support, a technical working group on unaccompanied and separated children has been set-up in January to coordinate all family tracing and reunification processes in Northern Syria. 138 such cases were documented in the aftermath of the Aleppo evacuation. In the first quarter of 2017, the United Nations confirmed more than 430 severe violations against children including killing, maiming, abduction and recruitment, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access.

Civilian casualties

During the intense fighting in Raqqah, an estimated 100,000 civilians were trapped in the city, under constant attack and bombardment, while about half a million



Refugee child in Syria

Foto: Florimond Collette

people were in need of humanitarian assistance, including 200,000 IDPs across the governorate. During the fighting, the main public hospital in Raqqah has ceased to function, while the remaining few private hospitals were only partially operational. In response to the situation, the affected population was provided with emergency services, such as daily supply of safe water through water trucking. Towards the end of the fighting, the city was completely cut off from life-saving assistance, with basic services either partially or completely out of service. By the end of September, 8,000 civilians who were trapped in Raqqah were released as ISIS lost control over the city.

Damaged infrastructure

In September, the al-Qaida offshoot HTS launched an attack on government positions in the northern countryside of Hama. Humanitarian activities were then suspended in several locations due to the severity of the Russian airstrikes. Hundreds of schools in Idlib and Aleppo were forced to temporarily close and health services at multiple hospitals, including Kafr Nobl, Khan Shaykun and Heish were disrupted.

Forecast

The humanitarian situation in Syria in the upcoming year is highly dependent on the political solution to the conflict. However, even when the dust will settle on the Syrian war, rebuilding Syria's damaged cities and addressing the severe cumulative deterioration of basic infrastructure will be far from straightforward and highly expensive. After eradicating ISIS, rebuilding Syria's infrastructure, estimated in US\$1 trillion is nevertheless the first step towards ensuring a sustainable return of many refugees and IDPs.



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