



# FACT SHEET SYRIA

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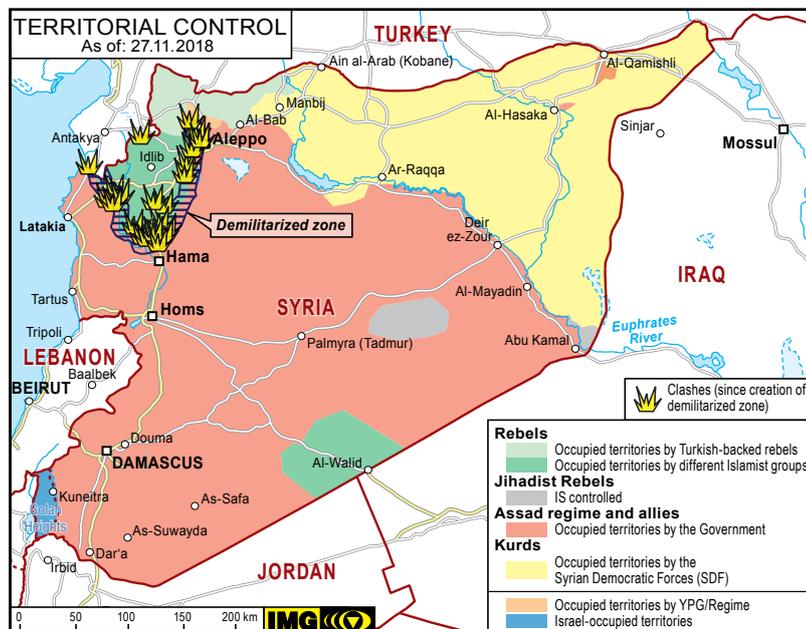
Despite the buffer zone agreement negotiated by Russia and Turkey, the last rebel-held province of Idlib and surrounding towns have been hit by heavy clashes. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which is linked to Al-Qaida and other jihadist groups refused to lay down their arms and leave the demilitarised zone.

In addition, a recent chemical attack in Aleppo suspected to have been carried out by rebels, was answered with air strikes by Russia and the regime and could be used as a trigger to launch a limited offensive in Idlib. The successes of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) against ISIS in As-Safa, in the south of Syria, free further forces for an offensive in Idlib as well as against ISIS in Deir ez-Zour.

The last few weeks have been marked by a rapprochement between the Assad regime and its Arab neighbours. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Egypt and others want to turn Syria back into

an "Arab" issue and thus push back the growing influence of Tehran and Ankara in Syria. This led to the opening of the border between Jordan and Syria in September, the first Jordanian parliamentary delegation to Damascus since 2011, and the planned reopening of the UAE embassy in Damascus.

The shelling of Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria by Turkish forces can be understood as a warning message from Turkey to the US. Turkey sees the continued support of the US for the YPG, the joint Kurdish-American patrols and the planned US observation posts along the border as a direct threat to Turkish security. Meanwhile, Turkish-American tensions are jeopardizing successes in the fight against ISIS at Abu Kamal. In recent weeks, the SDF has again suspended its offensive in protest against Turkish bombardments in northern Syria.



## MAP ANALYSIS

Attacks and clashes between different actors such as rebel groups, the Syrian Arab Army and pro-regime militias occurred in the demilitarized zone, in Latakia, northern Homs and western Aleppo. The Russian military counted more than 530 violations of the Turkish-Russian deconfliction agreement since October 17. Further fighting took place in Deir ez-Zour, where ISIS reconquered large parts from the SDF, as well as in As-Safa that had been fully liberated from ISIS by regime forces.

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

## FORECAST

At the end of November, the 11th Astana Conference will be held in Kazakhstan with the aim of saving the fragile buffer zone agreement in Idlib and advancing efforts with regard to refugee repatriation and reconstruction. In the coming weeks, the focus will be on the negotiation of a compromise between the US and Turkey with regard to the Kurdish-controlled east of Syria. Erdogan intends to use the threat of violence against the SDF to obtain political concessions from the US to reduce the presence of SDF along the Syrian-Turkish border. Ankara could also demand the establishment of a border patrol force consisting of Syrian rebel groups loyal to Turkey, instead of SDF fighters. In any case, Turkey is preparing for a confrontation with the SDF. It is investing in the recruitment of opposition fighters, which could serve as a future bulwark against the Kurds in Raqqa province, and in propaganda to rebel against Kurdish domination by the Arab population in eastern Syria. The recent entry of a new actor into eastern Syria could bring a new dynamic to the conflict. Unconfirmed reports indicate forces from a Gulf state who would fight alongside the SDF against ISIS.

*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

27/10: At the Istanbul summit leaders from France and Germany negotiated for the first time with Turkey and Russia about the ceasefire agreement in Idlib. They stressed the relevance of a UN-led peace solution for Syria. Further, they discussed the refugee situation in the event of an Idlib campaign, repatriations and financing for reconstruction.

01/11: According to media reports, the Lebanese Hezbollah is attempting to recruit US-backed rebel groups in southern Syria offering financial incentives and amnesty.

05/11: The US Pentagon reported that the complete removal of ISIS cells from rural areas of Syria and Iraq could take years.

06/11: Turkey has relocated around 1,200 Syrian rebels to the contested city of Manbij. The commander of the Syrian-Turkmen Hamza rebel group stressed that preparations for an offensive east of the Euphrates are under way. President Erdogan announced on 30/10 that the Turkish bombardment of the border towns of Kobane, Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ayn and Qamishli was the first phase of a "major military operation".

09/11: Turkey opened a new border crossing under the name "olive branch" in the province of Afrin. Other border crossings (Nassib- along the Syrian-Jordanian border and Quneitra- along the Syrian Israeli border) were opened earlier on 15/10.

14/11: In light of growing tensions between the US and Turkey, a US official described relations with the Kurdish-dominated SDF as temporary and tactical and noted that the SDF is not considered a terrorist organization. Jeffrey, Syria Special Representative in the US State Department stressed that the US plans to stop supplying weapons to the SDF.

15/11: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander reported that the regime has asked Iran to provide peacekeeping units for Idlib and the northwest of Aleppo.

19/11: The outgoing UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, notified the UN Security Council that it is unlikely that the Syrian constitution Committee will be convened by the end of the year. The Syrian government is said to have deliberately blocked the process. Geir Perdersen, a norwegian diplomat was named as Mistura's successor.

22/11: An unnamed Arab country has reportedly moved troops to Deir ez-Zour. It is likely that a Gulf state is involved and that the forces relocation is meant to compensate for the Kurdish dominance within the SDF and serve as a stronghold against pro-Iranian forces. Reliable information in this regard is, however, lacking.

24/11: Turkey has criticized the US-initiated construction of observation posts along the 600 km Syrian-Turkish border as it perceives them as a protective measure against the YPG.

26/11: President Assad called on the International Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to investigate a chlorine gas attack which was carried out in the city of Aleppo - according to Russian sources - by rebel groups. By February 2019, the OPCW will be able to name the perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

10/10, Idlib: The Turkish Ministry of Defense announced that the demilitarized zone had been established around Idlib and that all heavy weapons had been withdrawn. On October 14, HTS, which controls about 60% of Idlib province, officially refused to give up its arms and to end the fight against the regime.

29/10, Deir ez-Zour: PMU has allegedly sent military reinforcements to the 30 positions on the Iraqi-Syrian border that it had seized in order to prevent ISIS-fighters from entering into Iraqi territory.

01/11, Manbij: Joint US-Turkey patrols began in order to avoid an escalation of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. At the same time the US and Kurdish dominated SDF units jointly patrolled in Kobane, leading to Turkish shelling as a warning for endangering Turkish borders.

04/11, Deir ez-Zour: ISIS has recaptured Al-Susah, Hawi Susah, Mozan, Shajlah, Al-Baghuz al-Fawqani and Tahtani within the last weeks.

On October 31, SDF had already withdrawn from Jabal Baghouz, the oilfield South Kishma and from several border positions east of the Euphrates. Bad weather conditions and negotiations on the release of hostages had favoured ISIS offensives.

11/11, Hajin/Aleppo: The SDF continued their operation against ISIS in the Euphrates Valley, which was temporarily suspended due to Turkish attacks on SDF-positions in northern Syria.

18/11, Idlib: Tensions between HTS and Horas al-Din have raised, militants have regularly attacked positions of the SAA, which struck back. There have been more than 530 violations of the Turkish-Russian agreement since the establishment of the demilitarized zone. In preparation of a possible Idlib offensive, Russia established humanitarian corridors in regime-held area on October 20.

19/11, As-Safa: After nearly two months of fighting against ISIS, the SAA has taken full control of As-Safa. Remaining ISIS fighters fled towards the east to the desert of Homs. On November 21, the SAA allegedly deployed forces in the desert of Homs.

25/11, Aleppo: The first airstrikes were carried out since the Idlib deal was agreed about. As a retaliatory measure for the chlorine gas attack, Russia and Syria bombed positions of militants in western Aleppo and Idlib.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

09/10: President Assad issued a legislative decree granting a general amnesty for military deserters inside and outside Syria to encourage refugee returns. However, those who defected and joined a rebel group are still blacklisted.

22/10: Local Administration and Environment Minister Makhoulouf indicated the implementation of several projects aimed at rehabilitating infrastructure, especially in liberated territories. Makhoulouf, who also heads the Syrian side of the Syrian-Russian Joint Committee for displaced Syrians, clarified that the re-opening of Nassib border crossing with Jordan will encourage the return of displaced Syrians. However, Lebanese Minister for Refugees Affairs Merhebi claimed that abuses by the Syrian regime towards refugees are deterring others from returning.

03/11: Humanitarian Organisations finally delivered aid to Ar-Rukban Camp, home to over 50.000 displaced Syrians, that had been on the brink of starvation. Jordan held talks with the US and Russia about emptying Rukban refugee camp and returning the IDPs to rebel-held as well as regime-held areas in eastern and northern Syria.

03/11: Tensions between the powerful Arab Bushaban and Sabkha tribes and kurdish-led SDF flare up in Raqqa, after Bashir al-Hawidi - the tribal leader of one of the three main tribes in Eastern Syria - had been assassinated by unidentified gunmen near an SDF military installation, leading to doubt ISIS' claims of responsibility.

18/11: Jaysh al-Watani, supported by the Turkish army, started to proceed against corrupt FSA groups such as the Shuhada al-Sharqiya brigade that have been accused of widespread abuses and looting in Afrin. The latter was asked to subordinate to the Jaish al-Watani group or face clashes.

20/11: SDF took violent measures against protestors in the town of Shadadi - supported by the Jabour tribe - who were asking SDF to leave the city. Tensions are growing since three protestors were wounded by SDF during another demonstration.

26/11: President Assad reshuffled his government by renewing almost a third of the cabinet. The Interior Minister was replaced by Maj. Gen. Rahmoun, who used to be the head of one of Syria's intelligence agencies and is subject to US Treasury sanctions. The Minister of Public Works and Housing, whose relevance is growing as Syria shifts its focus from war to reconstruction, was replaced by Suhail Abdel-Latif.



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