

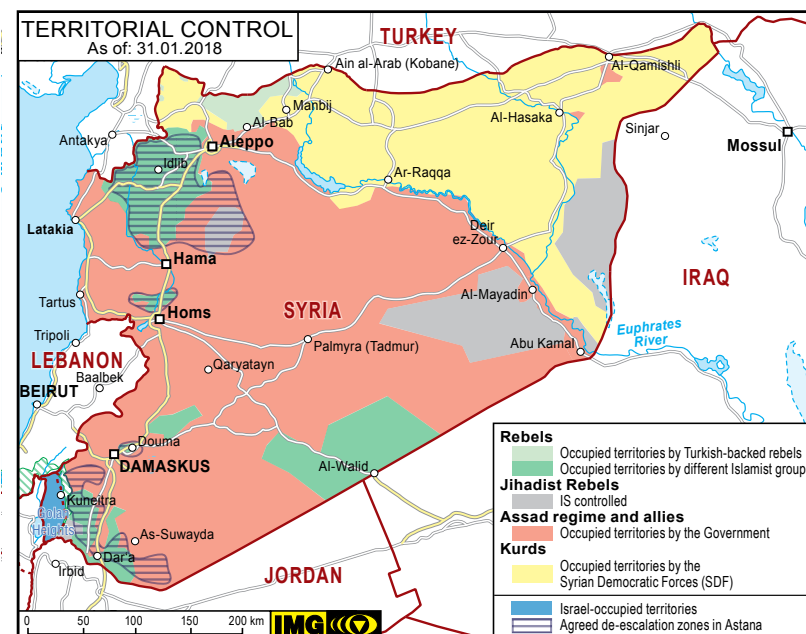
The Syrian conflict took a new twist with the Turkish intervention in the Kurdish enclave of Afrin. The announcement by the US to establish an indefinite military presence in northeastern Syria and continue to support the Kurdish allies YPG despite the collapse of ISIS triggered fierce tensions between the two NATO states USA and Turkey. The US has not stood in the way of Turkey's Afrin intervention, yet a confrontation with the Kurdish forces in Manbij and east of the Euphrates seems to be a 'red line'.

Russia did also not stand in the way of Turkey's offensive in Afrin in return for Turkey facilitating concessions on behalf of the opposition in the rebel held province of Idlib.

The offensive against the Kurds in Syria strongly works in favor of Assad's regime and Russia.

While the offensive in Afrin attracted the attention, the regime offensive in Idlib has continued, with the number of IDPs rising up to more than 100,000, according to the UN. The de-escalation zones, negotiated in Astana in 2017 failed to a large extent.

The political breakthrough in the Syrian crisis orchestrated by Russia at the Sochi conference did not end in a settlement. The main opposition groups boycotted the talks. The announcement of UN Special Envoy De Mistura to continue work on the establishment of a constitutional committee in Geneva, as agreed in Sochi, provides a glimmer of hope.



MAP ANALYSIS

In northwestern Syria, in the canton of Afrin, Turkish troops and allied militias conquered a few dozen square miles from the Kurdish YPG. Another hotspot of ongoing clashes is southern Aleppo, where regime forces are advancing northwards, against the opposition, towards Idlib. In southern Syria, close to the Israeli and Lebanese border, fighting was continuing on a low level, however the regime cleared all opposition pockets west of Damascus by the end of 2017. The east Syrian desert is the main retreat area of ISIS, who is still present in the Euphrates valley and close to the Iraqi border.

FORECAST

Against the backdrop of the probability of the Turkish offensive in Manbij taking place, the contentious point in US-Turkey relations will be the demand for withdrawal of US troops from Manbij. A military escalation is not in the interest of the two NATO members though, there could be an agreement on establishing a safe zone in Afrin. Furthermore, concessions of the YPG in the border area could keep Turkey from attacking Kurdish controlled territory. Another possible scenario is the hand over of (parts of) Afrin to the Assad administration. In this case Turkey would turn to Russia and Assad in the future to guarantee its security interests in the border region. Additionally, the partial relocation of SDF troops from Deir ez-Zor to Afrin could be used by ISIS to retake some areas. Beside the offensive in Afrin the second phase of the regime offensive in Idlib will start with the goal to regain control over the provincial capital Idlib and the retreat areas of the al-Qaida offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). By succeeding, the regime would have re-established control over most of the Syrian territory. Major progress at the peace talks in Geneva will only come with the conquest of Idlib and the final collapse of opposition forces.

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

17.01.: US Secretary of State Tillerson announced a new US strategy for Syria, which includes five objectives: the destruction of the terrorist organizations ISIS and Al-Qaeda, a UN-sponsored political solution for Syria that calls for the resignation of Assad, the containment of Iran, the safe and voluntary return of refugees and the annihilation of chemical weapons.

14.01.: The United States stated that the deployment of their troops in Syria has no time limit and intended to establish a 30,000 men strong border protection unit in northern Syria to prevent a revival of ISIS and secure the area against the Assad-Iran-Russia alliance. According to Anti-ISIS-coalition spokesman 230 Kurdish soldiers of the border protection unit have already taken up training. Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime criticised the US-plans fearing a consolidation of Kurdish militias, which indicates tendencies towards a partition of the country.

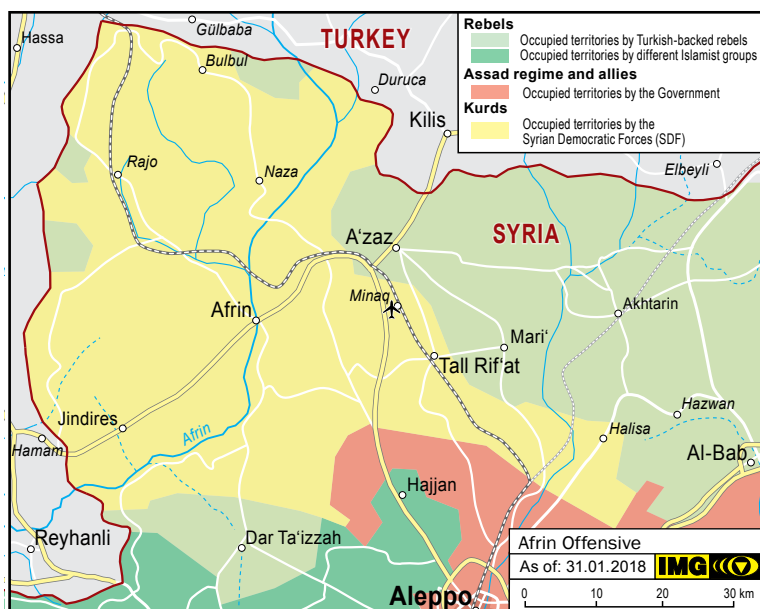
16.01.: Israel fired rockets on an alleged Hezbollah weapons depot close to Damascus. At a UN-Security Council meeting on the 25th of January, Israel complained about the strong presence of pro-iranian militias in Syria, reportedly up to 82,000 fighters. 60,000 of them are Syrian fighters, 9,000 Hezbollah members, 3,000 are members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and 10,000 are shia fighters from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

18.01.-23.01.: In the lead up to the offensive in Afrin, Turkey held talks with Russia, the US and Iran. Russia withdrew its troops from Afrin and deployed them to areas closer to Aleppo. NATO granted Turkey their right of self-defence, but warned its member to use proportional means of violence and minimize civil victims. US secretary of state Rex Tillerson offered the support of the United States for establishing a safe zone in Afrin. However, the demanded pullout by Turkey of US-troops from Manbij was rejected.

23.01.: After an alleged chlorine gas attack by the regime in Eastern Ghouta, delegates from 22 countries agreed on establishing an organisation to identify and sanction initiators of chemical attacks in Syria. The US complained about breaking the US-Russian agreement from 2013 to delete all chemical weapons in Syria.

26.01.: After peace talks in Vienna failed and fighting in Idlib and East Ghouta continued, the Syrian Negotiation Commission, a major opposition alliance, and Kurdish groups confirmed they would not partake in the negotiations in Sochi.

30.01.: The Russia-sponsored „Congress of National Dialogue“ in Sochi, which was boycotted by large parts of the opposition, published a declaration to establish a committee to forge a national constitution. The fate of president Assad was not part of the negotiations. US-special envoy for Syria, Staffan De Mistura, will nominate 50 members for this committee, and further proceedings will be negotiated at the next round of talks in Geneva



DOMESTIC POLITICS

27.12.: Medical evacuations from the besieged rebel-held suburb of East Ghouta started with 29 people being transferred to regime-held areas for medical treatment. In exchange, 24 captives were allowed to leave East Ghouta.

18.12.: In the course of their visit to Syria, a Russian business delegation signed contracts for the reconstruction, among other things, of the energy sector. The financial costs of the damages incurred from the war, according to the World Bank, is around € 200 billion, four times the Syrian GDP before 2011.

01.01.: President Assad nominated three new Ministers: The former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, the alawite Mohammed Ali Abdullah Ayoub as the Minister of Defence; Mohammed Mazen Ali Yousef as the Minister of Industry and Imad Abdullah Sarah becoming the Minister of Information.

20.01.: In the lead up to the military operation in Afrin, the regime proposed the local government of Afrin to hand over the territory to the regime and in return the Turkish offensive would be stopped. The local government rejected this offer.

12.01.: In Manbij, hundreds protested against the Kurdish dominated Military Council in Manbij after the death of two detainees.

16.01.: An audio message of Jolani, the head of Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), was circulated and called for a united opposition against the regime. It also stated that Jolani would not participate in negotiations that would disadvantage the Syrian people.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

20.01., Afrin: Turkey started an air-and-ground offensive in Afrin known as "operation olive branch", with the goal to establish a 30km wide safe zone, and fight the PKK/YPG and ISIS. Small areas and hills along the border with Turkey were conquered by the Turkish troops and their Syrian proxies. The Kurdish YPG fired rockets on the Turkish border towns Kilis and Reyhanli.

22.01., Aleppo, Idlib: Pro-regime forces started an offensive in southwest Aleppo and Idlib against HTS and ISIS in mid December and conquered the Abu al-Dhuhur air base.

29.12., East-Ghouta: Although East Ghouta is a de-escalation zone, heavy fighting erupted in the area between opposition and regime forces, killing 85 in the first ten days of January alone, amongst them 30 children. By the end of December, opposition forces started the second phase of their offensive in Harasta, which halted due to massive air strikes.

02.01.: The offensive in Beit Jinn against the last holdout of opposition forces in Western Ghouta began in late November 2017 and ended in early January as the parties struck an evacuation deal allowing 230 opposition fighters and their families leaving towards Deraa and Idlib.

25.01., Deir ez-Zour: In mid-January, ISIS launched a major offensive against pro-regime forces and the SDF on both shores of the Euphrates River after the SDF as well as regime units deployed parts of their troops to western Syria. Yet, ISIS made no sustainable gains. Fights are taking place north of Abu Kamal, with numerous ISIS commanders including Issam al-Ray, a deputy of Baghdadi, being killed.



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Videoblog „Feichtinger kompakt“
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