

# FACT SHEET SYRIA

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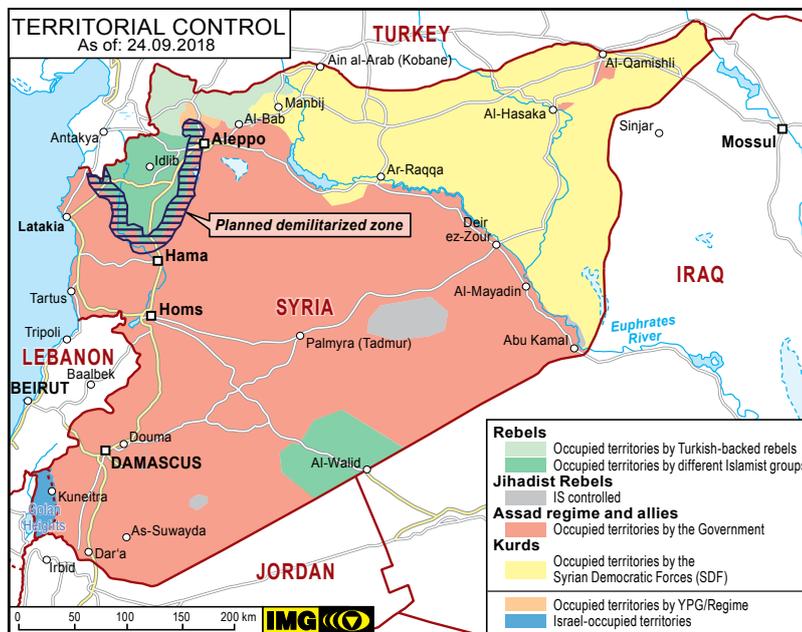
The agreement between Erdogan and Putin to establish a buffer zone in the southern provincial border of Idlib averted for the time being the feared regime offensive on Idlib. The Sochi deal indicates that it is in Russia's interest to avoid a humanitarian tragedy in Idlib, but simultaneously guarantees Ankara's support for a political solution in Syria. Erdogan's aim is to play for time, to separate "moderate" armed groups from *Al-Qaeda* linked groups, and ultimately to fragment and weaken the extremists.

After the accidental shooting down of a Russian reconnaissance plane by the Syrian regime, Russia indirectly accused Israel for the incident. Consequently, Russia is arming the Syrian regime with an S-300 missile system to secure the border with Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, causing discontent not only in Western states but also in Turkey and Israel.

Moreover, the new Syrian representative in the State Department, James Jeffrey, announced that the US troops' presence in Syria would be extended indefinitely. According to Jeffrey, Assad had no future as President of Syria, yet it was not the responsibility of the US to get rid of him.

Domestically, for the first time since 2011, local elections were held in regime-held areas. Even though the 12 million refugees and internally displaced persons could not vote, the regime signals strength and normality through this step.

At the military level, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched a final offensive to recapture Hajin, the last major ISIS-held city on the Euphrates River.



## MAP ANALYSIS

The demilitarized zone, agreed upon by Russia and Turkey, will run along the provincial border of Idlib between rebel and government fighters and will be established by October 15. The 15 to 25 km wide zone will be overlooked by Turkish and Russian forces. Meanwhile, the SDF offensive against ISIS continues in the Euphrates valley in the east of the country. Important territory such as the city of Al-Baghuz Fawqani has already been conquered. The regime also continues to make progress in ISIS-held desert areas in central Syria. ISIS regularly surprises its opponents with ambushes and offensives.

## FORECAST

Even if great hopes are placed in the buffer zone agreement for Idlib, the chances for Turkey to disarm and isolate *al-Qaeda* linked groups look rather dim. In fact, Turkey has been extensively trying since May 2017. A limited regime offensive in Idlib cannot be ruled out in the upcoming months, especially since Putin himself announced that the two strategically important motorways that run through Idlib would be reopened to international trade by the end of the year. This means that the end of the buffer zone will already have an expiry date, before it comes into force on October 15.

In the coming weeks, however, the ceasefire will be used for political negotiations: Erdogan plans to convene a quartet meeting in Istanbul with the leaders of Russia and for the first time of Germany and France to settle the ongoing conflict in Syria. Efforts to draft a new Syrian constitution will also continue. The US, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, France, the United Kingdom and Germany called on UN Syria Envoy De Mistura to set up a drafting committee by October 31.

*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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## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

17.08.: After the US halted its financial support aimed at stabilizing areas in post ISIS-Syria, Saudi Arabia and the VAE stepped in, contributing \$150 million. A total of \$300 million has been committed to the Syria Stabilization Fund, including Western participation.

27.08.: Following a meeting between the US National Security Adviser Bolton and Russian Security Council leader Patrushev, in which the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria was discussed, the defense ministers of Iran and Syria have signed a defense co-operation pact.

30.08.: According to Israeli media reports, new satellite photographs showed evidence that Iran is constructing a missile-to-missile factory in Wadi Jahannam in northwest Syria, in close proximity to a Russian S-400 anti-aircraft battery.

06.09.: James Jeffrey, recently appointed Syria representative in the US State Department, has indicated that US troops will remain present in Syria in order to ensure the withdrawal of Iranian troops. Jeffrey added that while Assad has no future in Syria, it was not the US' responsibility to remove him from power.

07.09.: The presidents of Turkey, Iran and Russia met in a summit in Tehran and agreed that the Syrian war should be terminated by finding a political solution. Erdogan's demand for a ceasefire in Idlib was ignored.

12.09.: US President Trump and French President Macron issued independent statements warning against war crimes and a humanitarian catastrophe in the event of an Idlib offensive. Both were threatening military counter-attacks in case chemical weapons would be used by the Assad regime.

17.09.: During a meeting in Sochi, Putin and Erdogan agreed about a 15-25 km wide demilitarized zone in the south of Idlib in order to defer an offensive for the time being. Turkey has to persuade the rebel groups to hand over heavy arms and the extremist groups to withdraw their forces from the zone by October 15.

17.09.: In the course of defending the Syrian air space from Israeli strikes aiming at alleged Iranian ammunition depots in the city of Latakia, a Russian military plane with 15 soldiers was mistakenly shot down. Long-lasting tensions between Russia and Israel were avoided through dialogue and the commitments concerning the common investigation of the incident. As response to the downing of its aircraft, Russia announced on September 24 to equip the Syrian military with an S-300 missile system.

18.09.: A meeting took place between the Saudi intelligence service, local Syrian tribal leaders, Kurdish-dominated SDF forces and US officers of the anti-IS-coalition in Deir ez-Zour. Saudi Arabia offered reconstruction assistance in eastern Syria in exchange for the option to support the SDF's Arab tribes, despite having been sceptical of these previously.

20.09.: Being under Russian pressure, the Syrian regime withdrew 30% of their troops from the frontlines in Idlib. Pro-Turkish rebel groups such as Faylaq al-Sham also began to withdraw from the buffer zone, whereas groups close to al-Qaeda as Hurras al-Din rejected the agreement.

20.09.: The leader of Hezbollah, Nasrallah, assured that the Lebanese militia would stay in Syria as long as they had the permission from President Assad.

26.09.: The repatriation of 50,000 refugees from Lebanon so far had been facilitated by controversial agreements between Lebanon and the Syrian regime since the beginning of this year. Another 200,000 refugees shall return to Syria by 2019. The head of the UN Refugee Agency emphasized that every year less than 1% of the people who fled abroad return to Syria.

01.10.: The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps responded to the terrorist attack on a military parade in Iran from September 22 by firing six missiles and armed drones at ISIS positions in Eastern Syria. There had been strong suspicion that ISIS and Arab separatists were behind the alleged attacks in the city of Ahvaz.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

08.08.: After the successful regime offensives in recent months, efforts to restore the access to basic services and infrastructure were being intensified. Thousands of displaced Syrians returned to Quneitra, Deraa, Darayya city and al-Mayadeen.

31.08.: While thousands flee southern Idlib as a pro-government offensive looms, wide reaching protests took place in Idlib and Aleppo Province. Protesters used the slogan "No Alternative to Removing the Regime". The protests received backing from opposition groups affiliated with Turkey and Al-Qaida.

06.09.: The Kurdish Syrian Democratic Council has formed the "General Council of the Self Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria" in Aissa, in order to coordinate between Kurdish-majority and Arab-majority communities.

16.09.: More than 40,000 candidates competed for 18,478 seats on local administrative councils in the first local elections held since 2011. Most of the candidates were either from the Baath Party or tied to it. Prime Minister Imad Khamis praised the elections to send a message to the world that Syria had defeated terrorism and is returning to normalcy.

16.09.: Contrary to numerous media reports that the YPG might fight alongside the Assad regime in the Idlib offensive, YPG spokesman Nuri Mahmoud declared that there was no intention to support an offensive of the regime to reconquer Idlib.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

15.08., Quneitra: Syrian Army Units have re-established posts in the recently captured city of Quneitra in Deraa, thus enabling the return of state institutions to the area.

16.08., Deir ez-Zour: In agreement with the Assad regime the Iraqi Security Air Force bombed ISIS' operations facility in Syria.

18.08., Deir ez-Zour: A raid by ISIS targeting the barracks housing of SDF leaders and American & French troops in the al-Omar oil fields in Deir Ez-Zour was warded off by US-backed forces.

28.08., Latakia: Russia strengthened its naval military presence in the Mediterranean, having altogether ten Russian warships and two submarines situated in Syrian water.

02.09., Raqqa: Eight SDF fighters and the head of intelligence were killed in an attack executed by ISIS.

08.09., Qamishli: Clashes between the regime and SDF fighters resulted in the death of 11 regime troops and seven SDF fighters. The confrontations started after SDF had established a "joint Self-Administration" civil entity in eastern Syria and arrested candidates participating in regime elections.

09.09., Deraa: The regime cracked down on multiple towns in the southern province of Deraa and arrested four former rebel commanders.

11.09., Idlib: Airstrikes carried out by the regime and Russia over southern Idlib and northern Hama have increased. According to the UN (OCHA), over 80 airstrikes forced some 30,000 civilians to escape Idlib and parts of Hama between 1-9 of September. Interim, the air campaign receded.

02.10., Idlib: The Turkish Army reinforced its positions near the Turkish border with Syria by deploying additional troops, weapons and equipment. A military convoy of 40 vehicles and heavy weapons arrived in Idlib in preparation for the establishment of the buffer zone. Furthermore, Turkey sent 20,000 members of Jaish al-Watani (Free Syrian Army), a Turkish ally, to the north of Aleppo.



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