

Syria Overview November 2018

Page 1 2	Contents Glossary North Syria	This document is for the use of the Japan Platform and its member agencies. This document must not be distributed further without the consent of the JPF Security Advisor.
3 Glossary	Elsewhere in Syria	Much of the text in this report is in <i>italic</i> . This is to illustrate that the contents are conjecture. Whilst the report reflects the current situation in northwest Syria, the analysis, views and opinions expressed are those of the author.
AOG	Armed Opposition Group	Disclaimer: The aim of this document is to give
GoT	Government of Turkey	information and make analytical comment. Japan
GoS	Government of Syria	Platform is not responsible for any actions taken by the
GoR	Government of Russia	reader.
Gol	Government of Iran	
IS	Islamic State	
KSA	Kurdish Self-Administration	
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Political wing of YPG and leading political party in Hasaka's 'Self-Administration')	
YPG	Peoples Protection Unit	
SDF	Syrian Democratic Force (mostly made up of and led by YPG forces, approximately 10% are from Arab tribes)	
SDC	Syria Democratic Council (political wing of the SDF)	
NLF	National Liberation Front (Arabic - Jabhat Tahrir Suriya. An alliance of 'moderate' AOGs, notably Ahrar Al-Sham)	
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (alliance of 'extreme' AOGs, notably Jabhat al-Nusra)	

المعمور

1. North Syria (Map source http://syriancivilwarmap.com)



IDLIB DEMILITARIZED ZONE (DMZ) The zone was established in Sept 2018 following talks between the governments of Turkey and Russia – Turkey being the main supporter of several AOGs and Russia being the GoS's main backer. The DMZ is an area 15 to 20 km deep area around the AOGs enclave made up of Idlib governorate and parts of north Hama and west Aleppo. The aim is to demilitarize the area and separate the AOGs and GoS forces. Russian and Turkish forces are to patrol the DMZ and enforce the agreement.

However, in the 2 months since the establishment of the DMZ, this has only been partially successful, and the situation recently deteriorated. Initially not all AOGs removed their heavy weapons from the zone, the first step in the DMZ agreement, notably Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS). In Oct HTS conducted raids against GoS forces who retaliated by shelling several AOG held towns and villages.

In early Nov GoS forces in north Hama advanced into the DMZ and took a town held by an AOG. GoS shelling and airstrikes targeting AOGs across Idlib followed the clash and in mid-Nov there were further clashes between AOGs and GoS forces, mostly in north Hama/south Idlib and southeast Aleppo.

On 24 Nov, an alleged chemical attack struck the northern neighborhoods of Aleppo city. The governments of Syria and Russia blamed HTS, but in subsequent retaliatory airstrikes hit both HTS and the Turkey backed National Liberation Front (NLF).

Comment: The alleged chemical attack serves the interests of GoS and GoR and helps them build an excuse to conduct limited ground operations in north Idlib and southeast Aleppo. The areas to be targeted are likely to be important infrastructure networks connecting the M4 and M5 highways. Notably the alleged chemical attack also happened shortly before the next round of Astana talks on 28-29 November.

MENBIJ ROAD MAP In June 2018 the Governments of the US and Turkey agreed on the Menbij Road Map that would remove SDF forces from Menbij city and joint U.S.-Turkey military patrols would ensure security. The patrols began on 1 Nov allowing for the second phase of the Menbij Roadmap to begin – U.S.-Turkish cooperation on the reconstitution of the city's governing authority. Comment: It's reported the GoT sees the Menbij Road Map as a model for the removal of all SDF forces west of the Euphrates and border areas east of the Euphrates. In parallel with the road map the Turks continue to threaten Menbij and the Kurdish territory on its southern border with military action.

TURKEY AGGRESSION ON THE SOUTHERN BORDER WITH THE KURDISH SELF AUTHORITY At the end of Oct and in early Nov, the Turkish military shelled SDF positions in Tell Abiad, and Ain al-Arab – Syrian towns controlled by the Kurdish Self-Administration on the border with Turkey. Also reported was the deployment of 1,200 Turkish-affiliated AOG fighters to Turkish territory neighbouring the towns.

In response joint U.S.-SDF patrols were conducted between the two towns. On 21 Nov the U.S. escalated its presence with the announcement it will establish Observation Posts (OPs) on the border with the alleged task to assist Turkey in securing the border from PKK activity.

Comment: Undoubtably the U.S. OPs are there to deter the GoT from conducting limited cross border incursions against SDF positions. This will have angered the GoT. The U.S. actions illustrate the reversal of U.S. policy, which had previously been to withdraw forces from the region, and their intent to continue to support the SDF in its fight against IS. The contradiction between this and the Menbij Road Map demonstrates the complex diplomatic and military relationship between the U.S. and Turkey. The U.S. continued support for the SDF is also driven by the U.S. wanting to counter Iran's growing influence in Syria and Iraq.

2. Elsewhere in Syria (Map source http://syriancivilwarmap.com)

ASTANA 11

The eleventh Astana talks orchestrated by the governments of Turkey, Russia and Iran started on 28 Nov. Whilst the talks were to center on humanitarian issues, the main outcome was the GoS reinforcing its rejection of UN involvement in the development the country's constitution and that it would only accept amendments to the current constitution. This goes against the outcome of talks at the Sochi summit in Jan 2018. The GoS also argued for the lifting of sanctions. Comment: The GoR has taken a lead in advancing the need for a new constitution and reportedly written a draft. It's unclear if Russia is part of this reversal by the GoS. As ever the Astana talks did not produce anything that would bring an end to the conflict in Syria.

Syrian Government (Syrian Arab Army and allies)

Islamic State

Armed Opposition Groups (Ahrar al-Sham and other AOG)

Armed Opposition Group Hayat <u>Tahrir</u> al-Sham

SDF/YPG

Turkish Army and AOGs

Israel occupied Golan Heights

Syrian Democratic Forces and Russia

Lebanon

ban

اربد

Irbid

CHANGE IN UN SPECIAL ENVOY

At end of Nov the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, stood down and was replaced by the Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen. Comment: Staffan de Mistura was not popular with Syrian regime who accused him of siding with the opposition. In Oct 18 he accused the GoS of blocking efforts to draft a new constitution, which the UN see as key to ending the country's civil war.

REMAINING POCKETS OF IS RESISTANCE

AS-SWEIDE – After several weeks of fighting, on 17 Nov GoS forces announced they had secured the Al-Safa hills, east As-Sweida governorate, causing IS to withdraw to the Al-Badia region, east Homs governorate. In Oct and early Nov the GoS negotiated the return of 27 Druze hostages held by IS. Reportedly, the deal included the release of 60 IS prisoners and the payment of a \$27 million ransom by the GoS. SOUTHEAST DEIR-EZ-ZOR – On both sides of the Euphrates the SDF and GoS forces are engaged in clashes with IS forces in the pocket. On 23 and 24 Nov, IS launched a heavy attack against SDF forces using poor weather to their advantage. After an initial IS success, the SDF regained lost ground with the arrival of reinforcements and resumption of airstrikes by the US-led coalition. Heavy casualties were reported on both sides.

IS pocket

southeast of

Deir-ez-Zor

al-Badia region

Iraq

Sanlıurfa

Ar-Raggat

Al-iabgah

Syria

سوريا

الرقه

RISISTANCE IN THE SOUTH

Oct and Nov 2018 saw an increase in attacks on GoS forces in the southern governorate of Daraa. More than 10 attacks resulted in over a dozen soldiers killed. Comment: The attacks are attributed to remnants of AOGs and growing local anti-GoS sentiment.

Rukban IDP Camp o

حمص

al-Safa hills

Governorate As-Suwayda

Damascus

دمشق

Daraa

حماة

Hama

حمص

Homs

Jordan *Mafraq*

المفرق

UN AID CONVOY REACHES RUKBAN IDP CAMP Positioned close to the Syria-Jordan-Iraq borders, the 50,000 civilians of Rukban IDP camp had not received any major supplies for 11 months. On 3 Nov a UN convoy of 78 trucks delivered 10,475 food parcels and flour bags, clothes for 18,000 children, 10,075 hygiene kits and plastic sheets, and newborn baby kits for 1,200 children. Emergency vaccination was also conducted protecting 10,000 children against measles and polio.