

Page	Contents
1	Glossary
2	Conflict in Southwest Syria
3	International Politics
4	Conflict Elsewhere in Syria

#### Glossary

AOG	Armed Opposition Group
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GoT	Government of Turkey
GoS	Government of Syria
GoR	Government of Russia
INGO	International non-Government Agency
IS	Islamic State
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IRC	International Rescue Committee
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)
SLF	Syria Liberation Front (Arabic - Jabhat Tahrir Suriya, is an alliance of 'moderate' AOGs, notably Ahrar Al-Sham and Nourredine Al-Zinki)
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (alliance of 'extreme' AOGs, notably Jabhat al-Nusra)
VBIED	Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (i.e. car bomb)

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.

Sources of information include Mercy Corp Humanitarian Access Team (MC HAT), INSO, and websites including, but not exclusive, Institute for the Study of War, Chatham House, Human Rights Watch, Al Jazeera, SouthFront, Rudaw, and Al-Monitor.

In the text when '*Comment: ...*' appears in *italic* and the subsequent text is also in *italic*, this information is not fact, but the opinion of the author.

**Disclaimer:** The aim of this document is to give information, make analytical comment and give advice. Japan Platform is not responsible for any actions taken by the reader.

## 1. Conflict in Southwest Syria (Map source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)

**GoS Southwest Syria Offensive** – During the 8-week reporting period, the Government of Syria (GoS) continued its campaign against the Armed Opposition Groups (AOG) with a successful offensive in southwest Syria. The inserted map of southwest Syria shows the situation on 14 June 2018 compared to the main map which is the situation on 9 August 2018. Significantly the GoS retook Dar'a, the city where the Syrian rebellion started, the Naseeb border crossing point with Jordan, & the Syria border with Israel occupied Golan Heights.

The GoS offensive followed the same strategy that had been successful in the taking of Eastern Ghouta & South Damascus. As with Eastern Ghouta this region of South Syria had been declared a 'De-escalation Zone' in an agreement between the Governments of Russia, Iran & Turkey in September 2017, & in a similar agreement between the Governments of Russia, USA & Jordan. Regardless, GoS & aligned forces, supported by Russian airstrikes, launched a ground & air offensive on 18 June. The attack isolated pockets of opposition fighters in Suwayda Governorate to the east of Dar'a, struck south for the Jordanian border, & targeted civilians & supporting infrastructure as well as military. Concurrently, Government of Russia (GoR) negotiators pushed to make reconciliation agreements with individual AOGs, notably excluding civil society representatives. By the end of June, GoS forces had advanced taking much of the opposition-controlled territory in Suwayda, but had not taken control of Dar'a city or reached the Jordanian border. Russian negotiators were only partially successful with the surrender of a few villages & some AOGs.

In the first days of July, GoS forces launched several attacks south to reach the border. Supported by heavy airstrikes, artillery & rockets, they were successful on 4 July. The Naseeb crossing was captured 2 days later.

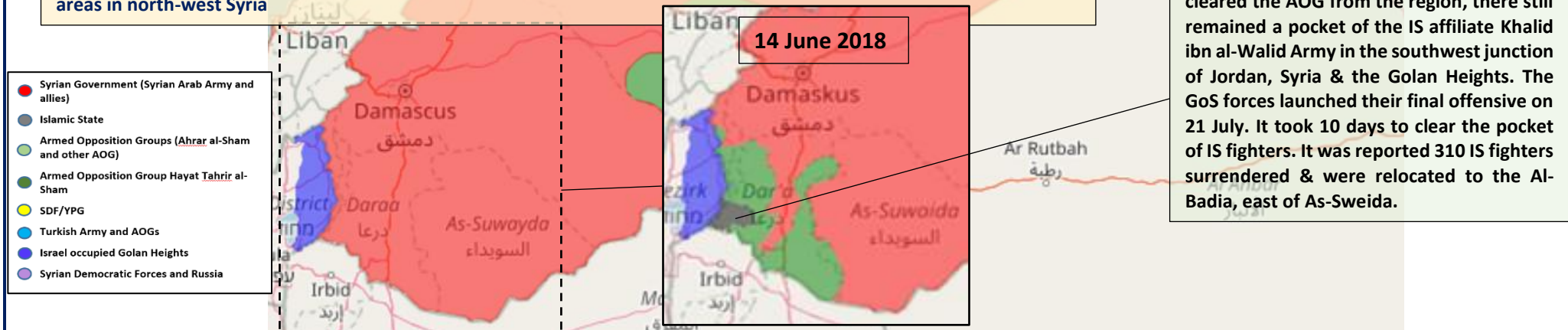
On 8 July, the GoS turned its offensive onto south Dara'a city. Although some AOGs had surrendered, a reported 11 held out in the city. After several days of heavy aerial & artillery bombardments an agreement was made allowing the remaining AOGs to be relocated to the northwest. The GoS regained control of all of Dara'a city on 11 July.

On 15 July, GoS started its assault on the remaining AOGs in Quneitra area to the west of Dar'a & on the border with the Golan Heights. Whilst some AOGs looked to make a deal with Russian negotiators, others including the AOG Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) refused. This initiated heavy GoS artillery & aerial attacks until an agreement was reached. On the 18 July, Russian negotiators had reached deals with many towns & AOGs. Quneitra fell to GoS forces on 20 July & the deportation of AOGs fighters to northwest Syria began.

A total of 10,064 individuals, including women and children, were evacuated from southwest Syria to Idleb and other areas in north-west Syria

**The Humanitarian Impact** – The GoS southern offensive created one of the largest displacement of civilians of the conflict. By 2 July, 2 weeks into the offensive, over 270,000 people had been displaced, including at least 164,000 to Quneitra & 60,000 to the areas near the Jordanian border. Since the end of the offensive on 31 July, there were reports of initial smaller-scale return movements of IDPs to their areas of origin in Qunaitra & Western Dar'a governorate. As of 1 August, up to 184,000 individuals were estimated to remain displaced. Access constraints caused by the suspension of nearly all cross-border assistance & a lack of presence & capacity on the ground, limited the humanitarian response by UN agencies & their partners. The UN & their partners, both in Syria & Turkey, require \$84.8 million to support 300,000 affected people in southwest Syria. (source: Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 5, 2 August 2018).

**Islamic State Pocket** – Once the GoS had cleared the AOG from the region, there still remained a pocket of the IS affiliate Khalid ibn al-Walid Army in the southwest junction of Jordan, Syria & the Golan Heights. The GoS forces launched their final offensive on 21 July. It took 10 days to clear the pocket of IS fighters. It was reported 310 IS fighters surrendered & were relocated to the Al-Badiah, east of As-Sweida.



## 2. International Politics

- Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu flew to Moscow and met President Putin on 12 July 2018. The topic of discussion was the Government of Iran's and its Shia proxy Hezbollah presence in Syria. Previously Israel has said it will not allow Iran or Hezbollah to be established permanently in a post-war Syria. The GoR had stated it would be unrealistic to expect Iran to fully withdraw from the country. *Comment: It seems likely that the two leaders agreed a deal that would involve the deployment of GoS forces on the border with the Israeli occupied Golan Heights – in accordance with the 1974 agreement that limited military deployment by both sides of the border – and the withdrawal of Iranian forces and Hezbollah from the area. Three days later the GoS forces launched their offensive in the Quneitra Governorate which borders the Golan Heights, with no warnings or reaction from Israel. This strongly suggests Netanyahu was given strong reassurance that no Iranian or Hezbollah forces would participate in the offensive.*
- On 16 July, U.S. President Trump & Russian President Putin held a summit in Helsinki, Finland. The summit was behind closed doors with only the Presidents & their translators attending. The only clear reference to Syria in the post talks news conference was reassurance from both leaders to the Government of Israel that the situation on the Golan Heights would be restored to the 1974 agreement, and thereby not be threatened by Iranian or Hezbollah forces. *Comment: Trump probably didn't challenge Putin's policy in Syria, having already committed the US to having no future influence in the country, only on Israel & Iran did Trump probably contest Putin. On Israel Trump got the response he wanted, although this had probably been determined at the meeting between Putin and Netanyahu a few days earlier. The only issue of contention was Iran & its continued presence in Syria & growing regional influence. The guarantees given by Putin in relation to the Golan Heights suggests Putin believes rising tensions between Iran & Israel is not in Russia's interest, & will go some way to appease the fears of the US and Israel.*
- The 10<sup>th</sup> round of Astana talks between the Governments of Iran, Turkey, and Russia took place on 30 & 31 July – although the location was Sochi, Russia. Also attending were representatives of GoS and some Syrian opposition groups. In addition to the usual rhetoric, the closing statement included a call for the UN & international support in rebuilding infrastructure, release of detainees, and to assist in the safe return of Syrian refugees. The guarantors also committed to assist the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva.
- GoR announced the creation of the 'Center for the Reception, Allocation and Accommodation of Refugees' (CRAAR) to facilitate & monitor the return of all IDPs & Syrian refugees from foreign countries. GoR also proposed for a joint action plan on Syrian refugee returns to the U.S.

*Comment: International actors are evidently turning their attention to a post-conflict Syria under the regime of Assad & his government. The GoR seems to want to continue its dominance of the country and influence in the region by leading the rebuild of Syria, but are cleverly enticing the UN & US to join in paying for it through what seems reasonable humanitarian requests.*

### 3. Conflict Elsewhere in Syria

(Map source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)

**Attacks in Afrin** – Two VBIEDs exploded in Afrin city on 27 June, one outside the Dirsem Hospital, and the second in front of the headquarters of the Turkish-affiliated AOG. The YPG claiming responsibility for both. On the same day a VBIED in the car of a Local Council member was dismantled in Jarablus. On 20 July, Turkey reinforced its military units in north Syria. *Comment: Whilst the GoT states its occupation is only temporary, their military reinforcements, developing infrastructure, and building local governance bodies suggests otherwise. It is also highly likely the GoT intends to expand this control to include Manbij and all of the west bank of the Euphrates River. YPG attacks on Turkish, AOGs and the administrative structure supporting the Turkish occupation of Afrin & North Aleppo is expected to continue.*

**IS Attacks in Suwayda** – On 25 July, coordinated suicide attacks by IS on As-Sweida city and eastern rural As-Sweida and subsequent fighting, killed an estimated 240 people, injured at least 170, and displaced many more. Scores of IS militants also raided homes in at least eight villages in eastern and north-eastern rural As-Sweida, reportedly killing civilians inside their homes and kidnapping a number of women and children. *Comment: Despite this attack that took place under GoS control, a week later the GoS relocated 310 IS fighters to the area!*

**US-Turkey Joint Patrols** – As part of the ‘Menbij Roadmap’ agreed between the USA and Government of Turkey (GoT), joint US & Turkey military patrols took place on the outskirts of Menbij in mid-June. On 15 July, the Menbij Military Council announced all YPG forces had left Menbij in accordance with the Roadmap. Joint training of US & Turkish troops involved in the patrols was announced by the US on 19 July.

**Talks between the Kurds and the GoS** – The first official talks between the GoS and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), took place on 27 & 28 July in Damascus. The talks were mostly concerned with the future of the Kurdish Self Administration, which is dominated by the Kurdish PYD. Initial reports suggest the talks went well with the SDF willing to discuss many of the GoS demands for handing over heavy weapons and reinstating GoS institutions in the northeast. In exchange the SDF would be given “key roles” in developing local governance in the northeast. Reportedly the Kurdish officials stated their willingness to participate in military operations in Idlib governorate alongside GoS forces. *Comment: This is yet another indicator that lead actors are planning for a post-conflict Syria under the regime of Assad & his government. The PYD recognises the reality that without a substantial change in US policy to supporting the SDF, it could not withstand the threat of conflict with both the GoS & Turkey. An agreement with the GoS offers the Kurds some hope of limited autonomy.*

**Idlib Governorate** – Idlib is the only remaining stronghold of opposition groups. It is estimated there are 3 million people in the Governorate of which half are IDPs. It is also estimated there are 75,000 fighters from various armed opposition groups.

On 19 July, the entire population (7,000 people) of the two predominantly Shiite villages of Foah & Kafraya in Idlib governorate were evacuated by the GoS, ending the 2 year siege imposed by AOGs on the villages. *Comment: The evacuation of the 2 villages enables the GoS to attack Idlib without fear of a reprisal attack on the villages by AOGs. The GoS has been vocal about a future offensive on Idlib – this is probably to pressure some AOGs in hope they will agree to ‘reconciliation agreements’. Whilst the AOG are trying to present a united front in the form of a common operations room, it is likely they will split. The GoT is attempting to persuade AOGs that are part of the National Liberation Front, which GoT support, to come to an agreement with the GoS. It is also trying to persuade HTS to disband. Although the GoT will play a lead role in how the offense develops, the 12 Turkish military observation posts encircling Idlib are unlikely to deter the GoS from an offensive. Its likely some AOGs will come to an agreement with the GoS & those who don’t will be attacked. This will create a displacement of civilians greater than that seen recently in southwest Syria. Humanitarian access will only be possible over the border with Turkey & this will probably be problematic due to the GoTs control & restrictions on NGOs operating in Turkey & northwest Syria.*

#### Israeli Attacks

- 18 June – Israeli airstrikes targeted Hezbollah and other Iranian backed militia near the Abu Kamal crossing between Syria and Iraq.
- 26 June – Israeli military launched 2 missiles destroying an Iranian weapons depot near Damascus international airport
- 15 July – Israeli aircraft targeted installations used by Iranian forces at Nayrab Airbase near Aleppo city.
- 24 July – Israel shot down a Syrian Military aircraft over the Golan Heights.

- Syrian Government (Syrian Arab Army and allies)
- Islamic State
- Armed Opposition Groups (Ahrar al-Sham and other AOG)
- Armed Opposition Group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
- SDF/YPG
- Turkish Army and AOGs
- Israel occupied Golan Heights
- Syrian Democratic Forces and Russia

