



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Syria: what next?

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## Summary

With almost all its territory in Syria gone, ISIS/Daesh has become more like an insurgent group; the old 'Islamic State' with all the extra threat that holding territory meant, is no more. The Assad Government in Syria looks as if it will survive, supported by Iranian-backed ground forces and Russian air power.

### **Increasing violence**

Any thoughts that these developments mean the outbreak of peace would be over-optimistic, however. As the ISIS threat has diminished, the Syrian Government and its allies have turned their attention to remaining strongholds of the Syrian opposition and other extremist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, linked to al-Qaeda.

The four de-escalation zones established by the Russian-led [Astana political negotiations](#) process have not all achieved their stated goal of maintaining ceasefires. While Homs and the far southwest have been relatively calm, massive destruction has been unleashed in recent weeks on Eastern Ghouta and Idlib.

Eastern Ghouta is a suburb of Damascus that is home to some 400,000 people and it is the last pocket of resistance to the Government near the capital. It has been under siege since 2013 but the increased tempo of violence in the last few weeks has killed hundreds of people. The [UN says](#) that actions in Eastern Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria are probably war crimes. The Security Council [voted unanimously](#) for a month-long ceasefire on 24 February but short daily ceasefires organised by Russia, with artillery fire continuing, have not been enough to make much difference. One corridor was established to allow civilians to leave Ghouta, but residents are scared to leave, wary of revenge killings.

### **Even messier?**

The defeat of ISIS and the survival of the Assads were something that Iran, Russia and the Syrian government could agree on and Turkey, long opposed to the Assads, has been more concerned about the establishment of a possibly hostile Kurdish entity along its southern border.

With the unifying enemy of ISIS largely side-lined, violence is, if anything, increasing, as involved countries compete for influence in a post-conflict Syria, and Russia may be [finding it more difficult](#) to control its Syrian client than expected.

As Iran seeks to maximise a lasting military presence in Syria, the prospect of confrontations increases. Israel wants to keep Hizbollah away from its border with Syria and sees the establishment of Iranian military facilities in Syria as an unacceptable threat. And they have already conducted strikes inside Syria against alleged Iran convoys of arms for Hizbollah and military facilities.

As Turkey's increasingly nationalist government takes military action in the north of Syria against Syrian Kurdish YPG, who they say are a branch of the Turkish Kurdish PKK insurgents, they are confronting US-backed forces, a troubling situation for two NATO allies. The Turkish military action in Afrin, however, has run into difficulty as the Kurds, supported by Moscow, have turned to the Syrian Government for protection from Turkish forces. The Kurds have pulled fighters back from the battle against the remnants of ISIS to concentrate on Afrin.

The US, supporting its Kurdish allies, retains a hold on significant territory in the east of the country but that alliance has been shaken by the Turkish action in Afrin.

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### **Chemical weapons**

There have been continuing reports of chemical weapons being used: mustard gas, chlorine and even Sarin, the most deadly of these toxins, have used, according to the [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons](#).

### **Refugees and international assistance**

[According to the UN](#), 13.1 million people need humanitarian aid, including almost 3 million people in need trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. 6.5 million people have been driven from their homes to other places in Syria; well over 1.2 million have been displaced this year alone.

The UN [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) for Syria needs \$3.5 billion and as at 28 February \$3.3 billion of that remained unmet. The UK had by February 2018 [allocated £487 million](#) for work in Syria to UN agencies and £65 million to NGOs for the financial year 2017/18.

### **British contribution to the campaign against ISIS**

ISIS has lost 98% of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria and in December 2017 the Iraqi government declared military victory over ISIS. The situation in Syria remains complex, with operations to defeat ISIS complicated by the ongoing Syrian civil conflict. The Coalition has committed to maintaining its military commitments in Iraq and Syria. While tracking down remaining ISIS fighters remains a priority, the military campaign has shifted towards stabilisation, capacity-building and training.

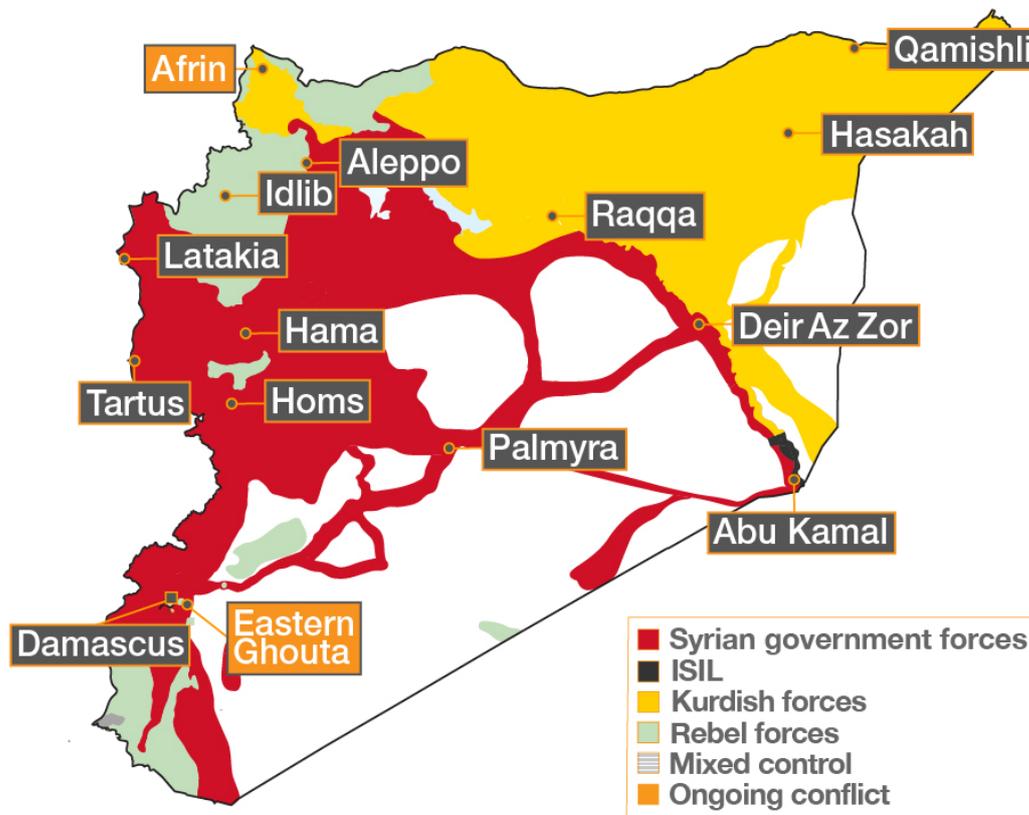
For more on this, see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: what now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?](#), March 2018

### **Other relevant Commons Briefing Papers include:**

[Iran update 2018](#), February 2018

[Lebanon 2018](#), January 2018

# 1. On the ground



Source: [Aljazeera](#) and [Institute for the Study of War](#). Updated 21 February 2018

## 1.1 De-escalation zones

The Astana process is a series of meetings between Russia, Iran, the Syrian Government and certain Syrian factions to try to find a mediated solution to the Syrian conflict (for more see the section on political negotiations, below).

In 2017, leaders from the three countries set up de-escalation zones in Syria that covered mainly rebel-held areas in Idlib, northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, a suburb that is home to some 400,000 people to the north of Damascus, and areas around Deraa and Quneitra in the far south near the border with Jordan.

Ceasefires were meant to be established in these de-escalation zones from summer 2017 (see the section below on political negotiations), the Syrian Government was to stop carrying out air raids and allow full humanitarian access, while the Russian air force would conduct surveillance operations only. The deal was guaranteed by Iran and Turkey as well as Russia, meaning that military personnel from those three countries would act as observers, staffing check points for example.

Critics say that the Astana process de-escalation zones were little more than an opportunity for the Syrian Government to regroup its forces and, together with its Iranian and Russian backers, to concentrate on

knocking out resistance from each of these zones at a more leisurely pace. David Pilling in the *Financial Times* argues that, while Western powers acquiesced to the de-escalation zones, unclear about how to proceed in Syria, Iran, Russia and Syria have been pursuing their clearer goals:

Together they have turned two of the four “de-escalation zones” Moscow pushed for last year — eastern Ghouta next to Damascus and Idlib in the north-west — into the seventh circle of hell.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Idlib and Eastern Ghouta

While the Syrian Government and its allies were concentrating on the eastern and central areas of Syria, the southern de-confliction zone and those around Idlib, in the north west, and Ghouta, to the north east of Damascus, held reasonably well.

As the Syrian Government has turned its attention to Idlib and Ghouta, supported by Russian air strikes, the situation in those areas has deteriorated drastically.

On 10 February the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said that actions in Idlib and Ghouta had been exceptionally violent:

The past week has been one of the bloodiest periods of the entire conflict, with wave after wave of deadly airstrikes leading to civilian casualties in areas of Eastern Ghouta and Idlib. The no-holds-barred nature of this assault is evidenced by reports that at least nine medical facilities, six of them in Idlib and three in Eastern Ghouta, were hit by airstrikes. Even by Syria’s atrocious standards, these are exceptionally deplorable developments -- and a cruel irony given that both have been declared ‘de-escalation areas’.<sup>2</sup>

### Idlib

More than 2.5 million people live in the Idlib area, including over 1.1 million internally displaced people. Since December 2017, the intensification of military action against the rebel-held enclave has displaced some 270,000 people. Medical facilities have been targeted.

At the beginning of February a Russian warplane was shot down while carrying out a patrolling mission over Idlib by someone using a shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile. The attack was claimed by al-Qaeda-linked rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, who said it was in retaliation for the Russian air campaign. The Russian pilot probably killed himself with a grenade to avoid capture and was posthumously honoured by Russia. Activists on the ground in Idlib have suggested that the intense Russian airstrikes against Idlib are revenge for the incident.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has gained control of much of the Idlib enclave, ousting other rebel groups. It is widely described as a terrorist grouping.

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<sup>1</sup> [‘Russia and Iran cynically exploit divisions over Syria’](#), *Financial Times*, 27 February 2018

<sup>2</sup> [‘UN rights chief urges international action as violence soars in Syria’](#), UN Office of the Human Rights High Commissioner press release, 10 February 2018

## Eastern Ghouta

Many medical facilities in Eastern Ghouta have been attacked and observers suspect that this is a deliberate tactic.<sup>3</sup> Five medical centres were attacked in Eastern Ghouta and the main hospital in northern Hama has been attacked 11 times. Some 700 people have died in recent weeks.

Ghouta has been besieged since 2013, but the increased intensity of attacks has made conditions for residents there far worse. The Syrian Government has stopped humanitarian supplies from reaching the inhabitants of Ghouta, with only one convoy getting through since the beginning of the year.

On 5 February another aid convoy finally reached Eastern Ghouta, but the Syrian Government had removed many of the medical supplies, including surgical kits and insulin, before the convoy was allowed through, according to the World Health Organisation.<sup>4</sup>

On 6 February reports emerged of chlorine gas attacks on the area, just after the aid convoy had left.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Government forces and their allies now control about a third of Ghouta. On 6 February, Russia said that it would provide transport and protection for rebels who wanted to leave the area. They would be allowed to keep personal weapons.<sup>5</sup>

On 5 February, the UK Foreign Secretary called on Russia to respect the UN-mandated ceasefire:

I am deeply concerned by the continued military campaign against the civilians of Eastern Ghouta and credible reports that Russian aircraft are actively participating alongside the Assad regime, contrary to the Security Council's demand in UNSCR 2401 for a 30-day ceasefire in Syria. The areas suffering from bombardments are civilian populated areas.

There are reports of a death toll of more than 600 civilians in the last two weeks, including 200 airstrikes and over 100 killed since Russia voted in favour of the ceasefire. All this in an area that, lest we forget, Russia itself announced as a de-escalation zone through the Astana Process.<sup>6</sup>

## Possible war crimes

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said:

... I must emphasise that what we are seeing, in eastern Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria, are likely war crimes, and potentially crimes against humanity. Civilians are being pounded into submission or death. The perpetrators of these crimes must know they are being identified; that dossiers are being built up

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<sup>3</sup> Abdulkarim Ekzayez, '[Attacks on Healthcare in Syria Look Like a Bloody Strategy of Forced Displacement](#)', Chatham House, 23 February 2018

<sup>4</sup> 'First aid convoy in weeks reaches rebel-held eastern Ghouta', *Financial Times*, 5 March 2018

<sup>5</sup> '[Syria war: 'Chlorine attack' on besieged Eastern Ghouta](#)', *BBC News Online*, 6 February 2018

<sup>6</sup> '[Foreign Secretary statement on Syrian ceasefire](#)', Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 5 March 2018

with a view to their prosecution; and that they will be held accountable for what they have done.<sup>7</sup>

On 6 February 2018 the UK Government set out its response to alleged atrocities in the area, in response to a Parliamentary Question:

The Assad regime is responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths in Syria through the disproportionate and indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, and according to the UN Commission of Inquiry, the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities and schools. It has also sought to terrorise civilians through chemical weapons attacks, starvation sieges, and the torture and killing of tens of thousands of arbitrarily detained persons. We are particularly concerned about the recent escalation of violence in Idlib province, where the regime has launched a large-scale offensive displacing up to 200,000 civilians, and a number of airstrikes on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, have been reported. We are also deeply concerned about the plight of the 400,000 people in Eastern Ghouta, which has been besieged by the regime since October 2013, and where civilians including children are dying from starvation and lack of medical care. There have also been reports of regime chlorine attacks in Eastern Ghouta in recent weeks. We have raised our concerns in the UN Security Council and International Syria Support Group and have called on Russia to use its influence to stop these atrocities.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3 Turkey, Kurds and northern Syria.

As chaos continues in Syria and the Assad Government seems to have survived (albeit dependent on Russian and Iranian support) one group that seemed to have done well was the YPG (People's Protection Force), the Syrian Kurdish group that has taken control of about a quarter of Syrian territory. That success was partly due to the support of the US, whose air force backed ground troops from the YPG in the first defeat for ISIS, in the town of Kobane on the Turkish border, and, with their related force the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, a mixed ethnicity group including Arabs), in the campaign against the ISIS 'capital' in Raqqa.

Turkey has always been uneasy, to say the least, about the strength of the Kurds in northern Syria. Ankara is concerned about the connection between the YPG and Turkey's own PKK Kurdish group, which is designated a terrorist organisation by Turkey, [the UK](#), [the EU](#) and [the US](#).

#### ***Operation Euphrates Shield***

The first Turkish action to hold back the Syrian Kurds was *Operation Euphrates Shield*, when Turkish troops moved into Syrian territory in March 2017 supported by some Syrian opposition troops, and battled both ISIS and the YPG/SDF. The Turks were keen to prevent the two parts of Kurdish-held territory along the border with Turkey from joining up.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Eastern Ghouta death toll casts doubt on Russia's truce plans', *Guardian*, 2 March 2018

<sup>8</sup> [Written question - HL4986](#), 6 February 2018

Operation Euphrates Shield was successful in maintaining a corridor between the two parts of Kurdish-held territory, although Turkey did



not manage to take control of the town of Manbij, partly because the US sent special forces to Manbij to protect its Kurdish allies.

Source: [Syrialiveuamap.com](http://Syrialiveuamap.com)

Manbij is an Arab-majority town controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces; the Obama Administration promised Turkey that the SDF would pull out once ISIS had been driven out.

On 14 January US Administration announced that it would support the creation of new border force of 30,000 personnel based on veterans of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-led militia that spearheaded the campaign for Raqqah. The Turkish Government summoned the US Ambassador to protest; a spokesman said that the US was “taking worrying steps to legitimise this organisation and make it lasting in the region”. Like other participants, the US wants to retain a stake in effective forces and controlled territory in Syria in order not to be excluded from post-conflict negotiations.

### **Operation Olive Branch, Afrin**

On 20 January 2018 Turkey started its campaign in Afrin, the western part of YPG territory, announcing its intention to move further westward to Manbij. The *Operation Olive Branch* is a collaboration between regular Turkish troops and fighters from the Free Syrian Army, the ‘moderate’ rebel force that has also been backed by the West and its allies. Afrin houses hundreds of thousands of refugees from other parts of Syria, who fled to the region because of its relative stability. Now several thousand people have been forced out of their homes in Afrin.

There have been reports that Arab Syrian rebels have been using the assault as an opportunity to settle scores with the Kurds, and that looting and executions are on the rise.<sup>9</sup> Syrian Arabs say that Kurdish fighters committed abuses after expelling ISIS from territory further east.

<sup>9</sup> [‘Syrian rebels are using the Turkish offensive to take revenge against Kurds’](#), *Washington Post*, 7 March 2018

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US patrols have remained in Manbij and have been exchanging fire with Turkey-supported Syrian rebel groups. Most of the conflict has been along the Turkish border.

Human Rights Watch has alleged that Turkish border guards have fired on refugees, either from Afrin or from other parts of Syria, especially Idlib, as they approached the Turkish border. Turkey has strongly denied the claim.<sup>10</sup> The authorities in Afrin have placed restrictions on people entering and leaving the area, raising fears for the safety of refugees from the violence both in Afrin and Idlib.

In February, it was reported that talks between the YPG and the Assad Government would see Syrian Government forces establishing themselves in Afrin. The state news agency said:

Popular forces will arrive in Afrin in the next few hours to support the steadfastness of its people in confronting the aggression which Turkish regime forces have launched on the region.

This drew strong condemnation from the Turkish foreign minister:

If the regime is entering there to cleanse the PKK and PYD [the Democratic Union Party, the political wing of the YPG], then there are no problems. However, if it comes in to defend the YPG, then nothing and nobody can stop us or Turkish soldiers.<sup>11</sup>

Kurdish officials said that any Syrian Government military presence in the Afrin region would be limited. On 3 March it was reported that Turkish forces had attacked forces backing the Syrian Government in Afrin, killing 36 people.<sup>12</sup>

Russia initially agreed to the Turkish campaign, allowing Turkish warplanes to attack Afrin through airspace controlled by Russia. Recently, Russia helped broker talks between the YPG and the Assad Government, and some suggest that the Russian acceptance of Turkish action in Afrin is aimed at driving the Kurds into the arms of the Assads, thereby weaning them off their alliance with the US.<sup>13</sup>

Having initially acquiesced to the Turkish action in Afrin, Russia said on 21 February that Syria's territorial integrity must be respected, switching its support from Turkey to the Syrian Government, and making Turkey's situation very difficult.

The Syrian Kurds may have overestimated the extent of the US Administration's support for their ambitions; the reaction in Washington remains to be seen, but the conflict sets Turkish forces and US-backed forces in direct confrontation. Representatives of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces said that they were pulling thousands of

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<sup>10</sup> [Turkey/Syria: Border Guards Shoot, Block Fleeing Syrians](#), Human Rights Watch, 3 February 2018

<sup>11</sup> [Turkey warns Assad against supporting Kurdish forces](#), *Financial Times*, 19 February 2018

<sup>12</sup> [At least 36 dead after Turkish forces hit pro-Syrian government troops in Afrin](#), *Independent*, 3 March 2018

<sup>13</sup> [Turkey's Risky Adventure in Afrin](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 February 2018

fighters back from the battle to remove the remnants of ISIS from Deir al-Zour to bolster their defences in Afrin.<sup>14</sup>

Some commentators argue that the reaction from European leaders to the Afrin campaign has been lukewarm, perhaps influenced by Turkish assertions that the operation will protect Europe from undocumented immigration. Kurdish representatives have talked about "the failure of the international community to curb the Turkish aggression and put real pressure" on Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Alan Duncan, Minister of State for Europe and the Americas, said that the UK has called for de-escalation:

We are closely following developments in Afrin in north-western Syria, and the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers are in regular contact with their Turkish counterparts. We have called for de-escalation and the protection of civilians. While recognising Turkey's legitimate interest in the security of its borders, it remains in our shared interest to focus on achieving a political settlement that ends the war and suffering, provides stability for all Syrians and the wider region, and secures the enduring defeat of Daesh.<sup>16</sup>

### **Deir al-Zour**

Deir al-Zour (also transliterated Deir ez-Zour) is a town on the banks of the Euphrates. The river marks the boundary between territory held by US-backed Kurds, on the eastern side, and the Syrian Government, on the west.

In February 2018, the Russian Government conceded that Russian nationals and citizens of former Soviet states had been injured in clashes near Deir al-Zour. Armed units backing the Syrian Government had attacked a Kurdish-led SDF military base backed by the US-led coalition. The US military responded with heavy artillery and air strikes, killing at least 100 of the attackers. Russia and the US had communicated over de-confliction channels about the incident, and Russia had denied that any of its troops were in the area, allowing Moscow to act as if relations with the US had not been affected. Analysts concluded that Russia was using Wagner, a private military company hired by the Kremlin to minimise official casualties and maximise deniability for the Russian ground operation.

The last remaining pocket of ISIS territory is on the eastern bank of the Euphrates to the south of Deir al-Zour; ISIS fighters have been putting up a fierce resistance to the mainly Kurdish-led forces trying to drive them out but those Kurdish forces may be turning their attention to the Turkish operation in Afrin.

### **Human situation**

The town of Afrin has been blockaded, preventing civilians from escaping the bombardment, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.<sup>17</sup> Although conflict in Ghouta and Idlib is causing greater suffering at present, the potential for Afrin

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<sup>14</sup> [Kurds pull back from ISIS fight in Syria, saying they feel let down by U.S.](#), *Washington Post*, 7 March 2018

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> [HC Written question – 130156](#), 5 March 2018

<sup>17</sup> UNOCHA, [Turkey | Syria: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria \(Idlib Governorate and Afrin District\)](#), 30 January 2018

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to become more damaging is evident. Already at the end of January, some 15,000 people may have been displaced.

On 5 February Oxfam reported that over 140 were dead and hundreds more injured in Afrin.<sup>18</sup> Agencies have limited ability to get to those in need of help. Oxfam's country director said:

Many people are in desperate need of humanitarian aid, so international agencies need to have safe access so they can bring in food and medical supplies that are fast running out. We urge all warring parties to minimize the risks of harming the lives and destroying the homes of thousands of trapped civilians. In the name of humanity, these people who have suffered so much already should be allowed to safely escape the violence.<sup>19</sup>

### UK Government policy

In February the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said that it was in contact with the Turkish Government over the Afrin operation:

The Foreign Secretary has been in contact with Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu about the situation in Afrin. We are closely following developments in Afrin and wider north-western Syria. We are calling for de-escalation and protection of civilians. While recognising Turkey's legitimate interest in the security of its borders, it remains in our shared interest to focus on achieving a political settlement that ends the war and suffering, provides stability for all Syrians and the wider region, and secures the enduring defeat of Daesh.<sup>20</sup>

The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee reported recently on the Kurds, and called for the UK Government to clarify its position on the YPG:

Turkey sees the PYD/YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Like Turkey, the UK defines the PKK as a terrorist organisation. Unlike Turkey, it does not apply that designation to the PYD/YPG. But the evidence to our inquiry clearly argued that these organisations were linked, with the nature and extent of these links being debatable. But the FCO's view was incoherent. Its statements refer to 'reported' links, but to have a clear policy the FCO should have its own clear view. The FCO should also have a position on whether the PYD/YPG should be included within the Geneva process to end Syria's war and discuss the country's future, given that new fighting and a further complication of the conflict risks being the alternative.

In light of the group's influence in Syria, the FCO should clarify its own position on the relationship between the PYD/YPG and the PKK. Having supported the SDF militarily, the FCO must also be clear about whether it will continue to do so—and whether it will engage with the de facto authorities in the areas liberated by the SDF from Daesh—as the YPG, the SDF's main component, comes into conflict with the UK's NATO ally Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> ['Thousands trapped in Syria's Afrin district need protection and aid'](#), Oxfam press release, 5 February 2018

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> [HC Written question – 125976](#), 8 February 2018

<sup>21</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee [Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK](#), Third Report of 2017–19, HC 518, 11 February 2018, Summary

## 1.4 Israel, Hizbollah and the southwest

### **Quneitra and Deraa**

As one of the last strongholds of the opposition to the Syrian Government, the region in the far southwest of Syria, became a de-confliction zone under the provisions of the Astana agreement of May 2017. Those zones were to be guaranteed by Iran, Turkey and Russia.

As with other de-escalation agreements, the difficulty has been in enforcement. A monitoring centre was established in Amman, Jordan, with Russian, US and Jordanian representatives, in a supplementary agreement signed by Russia, the US and Jordan in November 2017. The southwest agreement was reported to contain undertakings that no Iranian-backed foreign fighters would be allowed near the Israeli border or Jordanian border, including the Golan Heights, the part of Syria occupied by Israel to dominate the Syrian border.

The de-escalation zone in the southwest has held, at least in comparison with the violence seen in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib. That relative calm may not last, however.

### **Hizbollah**

Hizbollah has had a successful conflict, at least as far as demonstrating military prowess is concerned. The Lebanese Shiite militia dominates a buffer zone in Syria along the Lebanese border, and is close to Quneitra, a town right by the Golan Heights.

Although Israel's strategy so far has been to stay out of the Syria conflict, its forces have struck Hizbollah-related positions several times. Israel is particularly worried that Iran should not supply Hizbollah with advanced technology weapons. The Israeli defence minister said in April 2017: "We will not allow the transfer of sophisticated weapons to terror groups, and in particular Hezbollah."<sup>22</sup>

In January, Israel reportedly attacked a Hizbollah arms base near Damascus and on 10 February bombed a military base near Palmyra.

At the Munich Security Conference, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said that Israel is ready military action against Hizbollah and Iran:

We will act without hesitation to defend ourselves and we will act, if necessary, not just against Iran's proxies that are attacking us, but also against Iran itself.<sup>23</sup>

His intervention came after Israel claimed to have shot down an Iranian drone in Israeli airspace. Responding to the alleged drone incursion, an Israeli warplane entered Syrian airspace to target the control base for the drone, but was shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft fire.

Binyamin Netanyahu set out an Israeli 'red line': that Iran would never be allowed to establish a permanent military presence in Syria.

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<sup>22</sup> ['Day after reported airstrike, Ya'alon warns Iran not to arm Hezbollah'](#), *Times of Israel*, 26 April 2015

<sup>23</sup> ['Israel says it is ready to act against Iran after Syrian incident'](#), *Financial Times*, 18 February 2018

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As well as threatening direct action, an Israeli newspaper has reported that Sunni rebel forces in the Golan Heights area have been receiving support in the form of arms, ammunition and money from Israel.<sup>24</sup>

An analyst for the International Crisis Group argues that Iran-allied militias and Israel are on a collision course at present, that a war between Hizbollah and Israel would do massive damage to both Lebanon and Israel, and that Russia should broker a compromise between Iran and Israel:

Moscow should [...] seek to broker an Israeli-Iranian modus vivendi in Syria, one in which Iran waives construction of precision missile facilities and its military infrastructure in Syria and Israel acquiesces to foreign forces remaining in the rest of Syria pending a deal on the country's future.

To some in Israel, this arrangement would be a concession too many.

But Russia is not only a constraint on Israel, it also could be of use as the only actor that has at least some leverage over Iran and its partners.

Helping Israel avoid an all-out war that it does not want to fight would be no small service.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> ['To Push Iran Back, Israel Ramps Up Support for Syrian Rebels, 'Arming 7 Different Groups'', Haaretz](#), 21 February 2018

<sup>25</sup> Ofer Zalzberg, ['Russia Should Broker a Modus Vivendi in Syria Between Israel, Iran and Hizbollah'](#), *Jerusalem Post*, 9 February 2018

## 2. Chemical weapons

The UN panel investigating allegations of chemical weapons usage in Syria, the Joint Investigative Mechanism, sent its most recent report to the UN Secretary General in October 2017. It found that ISIS had probably fired mustard gas shells at Umm Hawsh in 2016 and that the Syrian Government had probably used sarin in an attack on Khan Sheikoun in April 2017.<sup>26</sup>

In a sign of continuing commitment to the Assad government and opposition to Western powers on Syria, on 16 November 2017 Russia vetoed the extension of the mandate of the chemical weapons inspection team (the Joint Investigative Mechanism) in Syria.<sup>27</sup> Russia denied that it was responsible for the demise of the JIM, saying that Western powers were using the team against Damascus and had refused to entertain Moscow's draft of the resolution, which would have amended the JIM's mandate.

Meanwhile, there were continued reports of chlorine being used as a weapon in Eastern Ghouta and in Idlib. Because of its many peaceful uses, chlorine is not included in the substances banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria signed up to in September 2013. It is, however, a chemical weapon with disastrous effects: it can cause permanent lung damage which can be fatal. Chlorine also affects the eyes and skin.

In February 2018, an internal UN report indicated that North Korea had been supplying parts for the Syrian chemical weapons programme.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> [Letter dated 26 October 2017 from the Leadership Panel of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism addressed to the Secretary-General](#)

<sup>27</sup> ['Syria: Russia blocks extension of chemical attacks probe'](#), *BBC News Online*, 17 November 2017

<sup>28</sup> ['U.N. Links North Korea to Syria's Chemical Weapons Program'](#), *New York Times*, 27 February 2018

### 3. Political negotiations

Russia has an increasingly important role in deciding what happens next in Syria, helped by several thousand military personnel on the ground in seven military bases and elsewhere.

The Astana process, led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, has partly eclipsed the UN-led Geneva process.

Russian, Iranian and Turkish leaders, along with some representatives of the opposition met in the Russian resort of Sochi in November 2017 to discuss Syria. The meeting proposed to continue with the ceasefire regime installed in January 2017 after a conference between the same parties in Astana, the Kazakh capital, and promised to meet again as necessary. The communiqué emphasised the success of the three countries' collaboration:

The Presidents expressed the hope that the progress in resolving Syrian crisis achieved through cooperation of Iran, Russia and Turkey would have a positive effect on the overall situation in the region, and reduce the risk of ethnic and sectarian divide.<sup>29</sup>

The leaders proposed a conference on the future of Syria.

Analysts say that the Russian-led process has increasingly eclipsed the UN-led process and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. Nevertheless, the apparent political payoff of the Russian military engagement in Syria may be fragile. The alliance with Iran is tactical. The two countries' fundamental interests are not aligned and alliance may soon turn to competition. Turkey has now clashed with pro-Government forces in Afrin, undermining their participation in the Astana process. Even countries with more money to spend have found the job of establishing stability in the region very difficult.

In January 2018, UN-led talks in Vienna collapsed, with no progress on the essential elements of UN Security Council Resolution 2254: a transitional governing body, the drafting of a constitution and UN-sponsored parliamentary and presidential elections. In a communiqué issued after the talks, Staffan de Mistura expressed frustration:

I share the immense frustration of millions of Syrians, inside and outside the country, at the lack of a political settlement to date. I hope that the forthcoming Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi will contribute to a revived and credible intra-Syrian talks process under the United Nations in Geneva in accordance with resolution 2254, which I intend to reconvene in the near future.<sup>30</sup>

The Secretary General gave permission for the Special Envoy to go to Sochi, the Russian resort on the Black Sea, for the next round of the Astana process.

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<sup>29</sup> [Joint statement by Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey](#), 22 November 2017

<sup>30</sup> [Statement of Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura at the conclusion of the special round 9 meeting of the UN-convened intra-Syrian talks in Vienna](#), UN Secretary General press release, 26 January 2018

### **Sochi meeting January 2018**

Continuing the process started in the Kazakh capital, a new conference was held in Russia in January 2018. Most Syrian opposition groups boycotted the talks, including representatives of the Kurds, who hold nearly a quarter of Syrian territory. The Syrian Negotiating Committee, the UN-recognised Syrian opposition body, also did not attend.

Some Syrian opposition representatives based in Turkey that did attend then refused to leave the airport because of the Assad insignia in the airport, something they said had been promised would not be there. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, was heckled by a participant over the Russian bombing campaign.<sup>31</sup>

There was some progress on the composition of a Constitutional Committee that will be set up to draft constitutional changes. The committee would include representatives of most facets of Syrian society, according to the participants.

De Mistura said:

We never had the government side and the opposition actually getting involved in a discussion of a new constitution, because they were not in agreement. I think we have reached that point.<sup>32</sup>

The Syrian Negotiating Committee criticised the fact that de Mistura had participated; critics say that the members of the Syrian opposition that did attend were those closest to the Government.

The Secretary General said at Munich that the Astana and Geneva processes are not in competition – and that the UN remains fully committed to “energising” the Geneva process.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [‘Syrian Peace Talks in Russia: 1,500 Delegates, Mostly Pro-Assad’](#), *New York Times*, 30 January 2018

<sup>32</sup> [‘Russia-backed Syrian peace talks agree deal on new constitution’](#), *Guardian*, 31 January 2018

<sup>33</sup> António Guterres, [‘Address at the Opening Ceremony of the Munich Security Conference’](#), UN Secretary General press release, 16 February 2018

## 4. Outlook

### **Russia**

Russia is demonstrating its greater influence in Syria than the West by hosting talks such as those at Sochi, having managed to draw Turkey into its alliance with Iran. While Russia has declared 'victory' in Syria and said that its troops can now come home, in reality, the situation remains very difficult. There were various pieces of common ground between Iran, Turkey, Russia and Syria: the US should be challenged, ISIS should be defeated, that the Assads should hold on to power. With ISIS holding negligible territory and the immediate threat to the Syrian government gone, two of those goals have been fulfilled and that has made the alliance less manageable. Turkey's main concern has increasingly been the Kurds.

Russia has not been able to extract compromises from the Syrian Government to help move the country towards stability and allow Russian forces to completely withdraw. The Syrian Government has continued to obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid in the de-escalation zones. The Syrians are also still implacably opposed to a new constitution – they only want to talk about amending the existing one – and are resisting presidential elections, since they would be a threat to the survival of the Assads in power.

To achieve a stable outcome, Russia needs international support for a political settlement somewhere along the lines of UN Resolution 2254. This would unlock international funding for reconstruction – indispensable for stability. Russia has not rejected the Geneva process, describing the Astana process as a contribution to the Geneva process and to the pursuit of the objectives of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

### **US**

The US has pledged not to bring home its troops until agreement is reached on a new presidential election supervised by the UN. The true level of US commitment to a presence remains unpredictable, as does much of the present Administration's Middle East policy. However, the US seems likely to want to hold on to its current position, where some 2,000 US troops alongside Kurdish forces control about a quarter of Syrian territory, to strengthen its hand at any negotiations over the future of Syria.

The recent Turkish offensive against the Kurds in Afrin clouds the US-Kurdish alliance, however, pointing up the US problem with two allies in the Syrian conflict that are sworn enemies. The Administration is reportedly divided on whether to prioritise the Turkish alliance or collaboration with the Kurds.

### **Iran**

Iran is much closer to the position of the Assad Government than Russia is. The Iranian alliance with Syria depends on Syria not becoming dominated by its Sunni majority, so free presidential elections are

difficult for the Iranians. And Iran in many ways has a stronger grip on the situation on the ground than Russia; between Hizbollah and other Shiite militias, plus Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and special forces, Iran has been indispensable to the effort to shore up the Assads.

Iran's long-term aim is to ensure a friendly regime in Syria and to establish a stronger military presence in Syria, perhaps with military bases and a Syrian militia organisation mirroring the IRGC/Hizbollah.

### **Turkey**

Since the success of the Syrian Kurds in controlling large areas of northern Syria, Ankara's main concern has been the alleged terrorist threat that presents to Turkey. With ISIS now looking less of a threat, Turkey have been free to concentrate on the Kurds. The Kremlin sees an interest in the damage to Turkish/US relations that that represents, but has recently been encouraging the Syrian Government to come to the aid of the Kurds against the Turks; Turkey's future in the three-way alliance is not clear.

It seems likely that the Turkish leadership has an eye on the presidential and parliamentary elections due in November 2019, and that part of their strategy is to take a strongly nationalist line against both the Kurds and the US.

### **Israel**

Commentators are increasingly worried about the possibility of Israel being drawn further into the Syrian conflict, and maybe into a battle with Hizbollah in Lebanon. Israel is already taking action against Hizbollah and has supported Sunni Syrian rebels. As Iran strengthens its position in Syria and the Syrian conflict has allowed Hizbollah to flex its muscles, Israel has made stronger statements of its intent to resist. After a meeting in Russia, Binyamin Netanyahu said:

I told [Vladimir Putin] that Israel views with severity two developments. One, the attempts by Iran to base itself militarily in Syria and the second, Iran's attempt to produce in Lebanon accurate weapons against the state of Israel. I made it clear to him that we will not agree to any of those developments and we will act accordingly.<sup>34</sup>

A direct Israel-Iran clash could be catastrophic.

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<sup>34</sup> ['Israel PM visits Russia for talks on Iran's actions in Syria'](#), AP, 29 January 2018

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