



## Scenarios for Idlib

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### Acronyms

|      |  |
|------|--|
| HTS  | Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (coalition led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) |
| IDPs | Internally displaced people                                  |
| ISIS | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria                              |
| JFS  | Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly called Al-Qaida/ Al-Nusra     |
| IDPs | Internally displaced people                                  |
| MIT  | National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)                        |
| NGO  | Non-government organisation                                  |
| OPCW | Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons         |
| PKK  | Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)                             |
| PYD  | Democratic Union Party (Syria)                               |
| SDF  | Syrian Democratic Forces                                     |
| SNC  | Syrian National Coalition (Turkey-backed opposition)         |
| SOHR | Syrian Observatory of Human Rights                           |
| YPG  | Peoples’ Protection Units (Syria)                            |
| YPJ  | Women’s Protection Units (Syria)                             |

All money in USD unless stated otherwise.

## Context

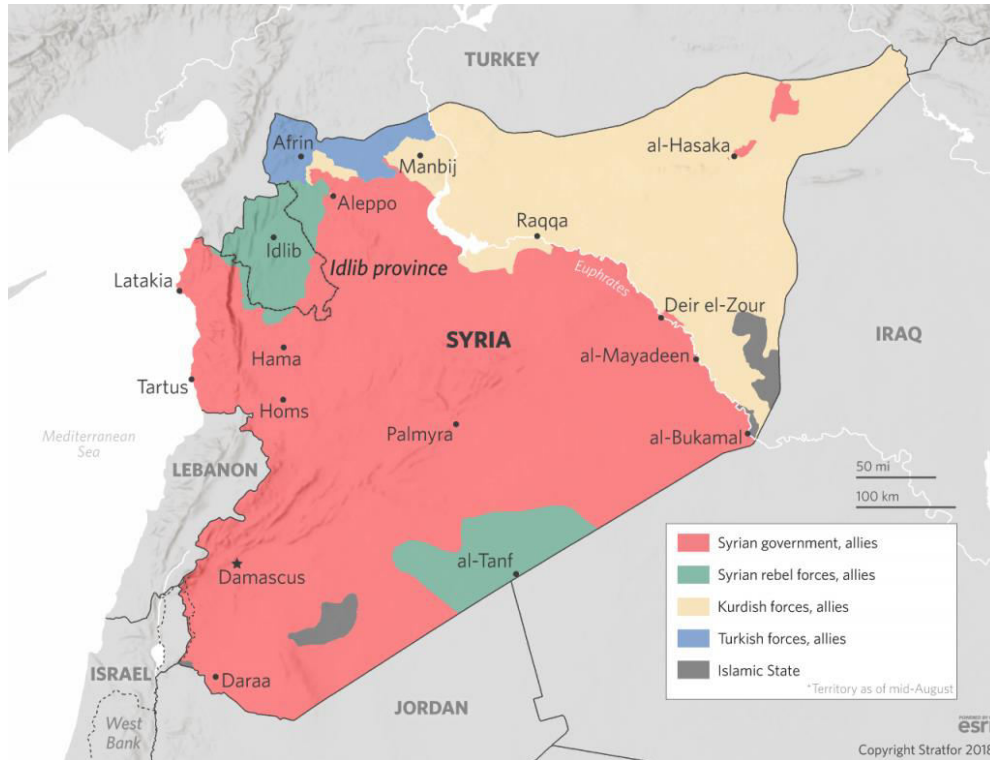


Figure 1: Map of who controls territory in Syria, August 2018

### General observations

- With so many failed and failing states, countries with regional ambitions, non-state actors, destroyed cities and the spread of the Internet, the Middle East is unlikely [to return](#) to the status quo pre-2011, pre-ISIS. Nor should it.
- In August, the UN and Pentagon estimated that about [30,000 ISIS 'members'](#) (UN) or [fighters](#) (Pentagon) remain in Iraq and Syria, about half in each country, which is about the same as that estimated in September, 2014, although the number rose to 100,000 by 2015. In the meantime, up to 70,000 ISIS fighters have been killed. The difference between 2018 and 2014 is that ISIS has decentralised and holds only isolated pockets of desert and one town (Hajin, Syria). Nevertheless, ISIS ideology remains widespread, which enables ISIS cells to conduct counter-offensives and terrorist attacks.
- UN has proved itself inadequate in dealing with war in Syria, with its multiple layers and shifting alliances, and permanent members of the Security Council on opposing sides. The UN requires big reforms if it is to remain relevant.
- In August, [Saudi Ambassador to Russia](#), Ra'id Bin Khalid, said that Saudi Arabia supports the Kurds' right to a nation state, and that of all countries in which Kurds live, Turkey is the worst oppressor of Kurds.

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## Syria

- Assad has destroyed Syria to stay in power. [Since 2011](#), an estimated 470,000 Syrians have been killed, 6.6 million internally displaced, and 5.6 million are refugees. Another 920,000 Syrians were displaced in the first four months of 2018. Between January and July 2018, 13,000 refugees and 750,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) [returned](#) to regime-controlled areas. Regime death lists published in August name 8,000 detainees who have died in custody since 2011. Amnesty International claims [13,000 were hanged in Saydnaya prison](#) (2011 – 2015). The Syrian Network for Human Rights says 82,000 ‘forced disappearances’ have occurred (2011 – 2018).
- ISIS remains a threat. On July 25, ISIS seized [18 villages](#) in the Quneitra – Daraa region, going from house-to-house killing people, and launched multiple suicide attacks in a market and hospital in the Druze city of Suweida, in total killing [273 Druze](#) and injuring another 220. ISIS took [36 Druze women and children hostage](#). Four women escaped and two died, leaving 20 women and 16 children being held hostage. Before these ISIS attacks, Assad’s security forces withdrew from checkpoints, and electricity and phone lines were cut, causing people to suspect the regime of having let ISIS attack in retaliation for the Druze refusing to fight in Idlib. After ISIS killed one of the hostages, the regime launched an offensive on [ISIS](#) in the Suweida desert, but the experience caused [Druze leaders to call on the international community to protect Druze, Kurds, and other minorities](#) from ISIS and the Assad regime.
- The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) found no evidence of a nerve agent having been used in Douma in April 2018.
- [Defections to the regime](#) have increased due to regime tactics (bombardment and sieges followed by negotiations), divisions within and between militia, militias receiving reduced financial and popular support, disillusionment with fellow militants looting, pillaging and abusing civilians, a preference to fight for the regime rather than for Turkey, a desire to be on the winning side and opportunism. Others have [fled](#) the country.
- The Assad regime ‘controls’ about 60 percent of Syria, where 72 percent of the population live. It has reclaimed three out of four Astana de-escalation zones. Yet, the Assad regime is nowhere near to winning the peace. The regime faces financial bankruptcy, and is entirely dependent on Russian and Iranian support. Its [army](#) is weak, and regime-controlled territory is rife with pro-regime militias and a black market economy.
- Russia acts independently of the [Assad regime](#), Iran and Turkey, and they often act independently of Russia. All use mercenaries.
- The US administration remains divided on critical strategies, including whether Assad should remain in power, its level of commitment to territory east of the Euphrates, and how to respond to Turkey’s occupation of northwest Syria. On June 27, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said there would be no peace in Syria while Assad and Iran remain. On the same day, US National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#) met with President Vladimir Putin and

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and claimed the Assad regime was not a threat to the US, ignoring that regime actions have contributed to the rise of multiple extremist Islamist militias. Talk of a US withdrawal unsettled many, as it would leave a vacuum for the Assad, Turkey, Russia, Iran and ISIS to fill. Subsequent statements by US officials – that the US will not leave Syria until ISIS is defeated and Iran's presence is curbed or eliminated, indicate the US will remain in Syria for years to come. US State Department, members of Congress, and military personnel contradict each other about the US-Turkey agreement on Manbij, and what it means for current administrative and security arrangements in Manbij and east of the Euphrates.

- The US has been consistent on two matters. One is that the US, along with the EU and others, including the UN, refuses to facilitate refugee returns and fund reconstruction until the implementation of UN Resolution 2254, despite Russia's increasing pressure to do so. To re-energise the Geneva negotiations, in August the US State Department appointed two new envoys for Syria (James Jeffrey and Joel Rayburn). The US has also been consistent in demanding that Gulf States invest in territory east of the Euphrates, which is secured by the US-led coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In August, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Australia and other countries pledged \$300 million for stabilisation in northeast Syria.
- Preventing the Assad regime reclaiming Syria are the SDF – US-led coalition in Manbij and east of the Euphrates, the US-Sunni Arab al-Tanf base at the junction of three borders, and Turkey and its proxies in Aleppo and Idlib.
- If Assad and others who have overseen war crimes remain in power, the regime will perpetrate abuses, including demographic engineering, as demonstrated by [Law Number 10](#) related to property confiscation. If Turkey does not end its occupation of Syrian territory and support for Islamic extremist militias, the civil war will continue. If the international community does not press for a political transition, Syrians will continue to suffer, the potential for regional wars will increase, and the UN and international community will lose all moral ground.

## Turkey

- In August 2016, Turkey invaded and subsequently occupied the Euphrates Shield triangle (Azaz – Jarablus – al-Bab). In October 2017, Turkey began setting up observation posts in Idlib, in accordance with an Astana agreement, but relying on the cooperation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In January 2018, Turkey invaded and occupied the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin. Since 2017, Turkey has created two opposition militia armies, whose militias are committing human rights abuses in Turkey-occupied territory.
- In June, Turkey completed a [764-kilometre high tech security wall](#) along its 911-kilometre border with Syria. The wall is made of modular concrete units, and razor wire, and is equipped with watch towers, command-and-control centres, electronic surveillance systems, thermal cameras, land surveillance

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radar, remote-controlled weapons systems, jammers, imaging systems and seismic and acoustic sensors. Advanced technology allows wide area surveillance and drone detection.

- Turkey's actions in Syria reflect its domestic trajectory. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey is becoming more authoritarian, ultra-nationalist and Islamist, with Erdogan openly claiming Turkey's right to reclaim former Ottoman territory.
- Up to [2,000 Islamist extremist militants with EU passports](#) live in Turkey.
- US-Turkey relations have further deteriorated since an unclarified agreement on Manbij (Syria) in June. US Congress voted to delay delivery of the F-35 fighter jets, the US administration has imposed tariffs and sanctions on Turkey for 'national security' reasons and because Turkey refuses to release imprisoned US citizens. Relations will further deteriorate if Turkey continues to import oil from Iran after sanctions are implemented in November, and if Turkey proceeds to buy Russia's S-400 missile defence system.

## Recommendations

- The international community needs to act quickly to prevent a bloodbath in Idlib by offering incentives for HTS and other Islamist extremist militants to disband, and not expect Turkey to do this. The most effective action would be to agree on suitable replacements for President Bashar al-Assad and others who have overseen war crimes. This would test Russian statements like that of Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, on August 4: 'Russia supports Syria and its people, and more accurately the Syrian state.'
- Turkey needs incentives to militarily withdraw from Syria and stop supporting Islamist extremist militias. Incentives could include Assad's removal from power, a new constitution enshrining autonomous regions, including in Sunni Arab majority areas, and a role in reconstruction.
- War will not defeat terrorist ideology. After three decades of wars against terror, there are more terrorist groups and more terrorists than there were in 2001. Resources would be better spent on political, judicial, economic, cultural and social endeavours, and, where necessary, the deployment of international peacekeepers to ensure internal and external border security.
- If the international community is unwilling to support a nation state called Kurdistan, then at least protect the Kurds from the nation-states that persecute them. In Syria, this could mean officially recognising, protecting and supporting the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and associated councils (e.g. establishing a [no-fly zone](#), the US having recently installed advanced radar systems in Hasakah and Kobani), and linking this support to developing political pluralism and security forces.

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## Relevance to Australia

- It is in Australia's interest to address factors contributing to terrorism in Syria and Iraq, given the rise of Islamist extremist groups in Asia. Nearly [1,500 Indonesians](#) have tried to or succeeded in joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Of these, 590 remain; 103 have been killed; 86 have returned to Indonesia; and 539 have been deported to unknown locations. Australia's contribution to stabilisation in Syria, east of the Euphrates, is a start.
- After an unsuccessful extradition request, Australia's most wanted ISIS terrorist, [Neil Prakash](#), was released from a Turkish prison on July 19.
- Australia [continues to support the JCPOA and trade with Iran](#), in contrast to US policy.
- The Australian Government should contribute to the development of strategic frameworks for bottom-up reconstruction and top-down reform linked to good governance, justice, security and an expanded private sector in Syria and Iraq. Contributing the equivalent amount of time, expertise and cost of Australia's military involvement in three wars since 1990 to humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, including the provision of insurance and other guarantees for Australian companies to participate, would demonstrate a much needed balance of realpolitik and humanitarian values.

## What is happening in Idlib

Following victory in the southwest, the Assad regime is intent on reclaiming the northwest de-escalation zone, but a full-scale offensive on Idlib would be far worse than what has gone before. Firstly, Idlib has a high concentration of Islamist extremist militants (in excess of 150,000), including foreign fighters,<sup>1</sup> with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) coalition being the most dominant. Many came to Idlib from eastern Aleppo, Ghouta and Daraa because they refused to surrender to the regime. Secondly, Turkey has a military presence in Idlib and supports many of these opposition militias. Thirdly, the population of Idlib is between 2.5 and [3.3 million](#), half being IDPs, with up to 76,000 having arrived from eastern Ghouta and Daraa in the past four months. An offensive could result in between [250,000](#) and [700,000 people fleeing the conflict](#). If Turkey does not accept them, [where will they go?](#)

HTS allegedly 'controls' [60 percent of Idlib](#), despite the presence of 12 [observation posts](#) run by Turkey, 10 by Russia, and seven by Iran, as agreed in the Astana process. These posts have not stopped militias kidnapping and shooting civilians, looting property, and fighting each other, with frequent assassinations of commanders and military clashes over territory, ideology, and [changing allegiances](#).

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<sup>1</sup> These [foreign fighters](#) include Caucasian factions from the Russian Federation, such as *Jaish al-Mouhajiroon al-Ansar*, *Jaish al-Usra*, *Junood al-Sham* and *Ajnad al-Kawkas*, about 5,000 to 6,000 Uighurs from China in the *Islami Türkistan Partisi* (Turkistan Islamic Party) and Uzbeks and Kyrgyz militants in the Taliban-linked *Imam Boukhari Brigades*.

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For instance, HTS and *Ahrar al-Sham* were former allies. Nor have the Astana troika and their proxies been able to kill or isolate hard-line transnational Islamists from other militants. Conditions have grown worse with the influx of IDPs from Ghouta and Daraa that added Saudi-backed *Jaish al-Islam* to Idlib's already warring militias, *Jaish al-Islam* being the nemesis of HTS, *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Faylaq al-Rahman*.

In [April](#), militias kidnapped more than 50 people, including women and children, mainly for ransom. Militia [infighting](#), indiscriminate shootings and bomb attacks also cause [civilian deaths](#). Between February 20 and the end of May, [inter-militia fighting](#) initiated by HTS or Turkey-backed militias resulted in 405 militants being killed, including 231 HTS fighters on one side, and 174 fighters from *Ahrar al-Sham*, the *Nureddin Zengi* Brigade and *Suqour al-Sham* on the other. In [May](#), [44 civilians](#) and 75 Islamist extremists (among them, HTS, *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Faylak al-Sham* as well as Chechen, Uzbek and Uighur fighters) were killed in Idlib city. ISIS also has a presence and on May 12, a car bomb targeted an HTS tribunal, killing at least 28 people, including five civilians, 10 HTS, and eight ISIS. In April and May, there were 93 [assassination](#) attempts on militia commanders.

To reduce inter-militia fighting and fulfil its Astana role of 'eliminating' HTS, whether militarily or by absorbing them into other militias, Turkey worked on forming a coalition of militias like it did in the Euphrates Shield triangle in 2017, which resulted in a Syrian 'National' Army made up of 60,000 fighters from over 35 militias. In [February](#) 2018, Turkey announced that two Turkey-backed militias, *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Nureddin Zengi* Brigade, had formed the [Syrian Liberation Front](#) (*Jabhat Tahrir Suriya*) in Idlib. The Front quickly took the HTS towns of [Ariha and Ma'arat al-Numan](#).

Turkey also has a [strong relationship with HTS](#).<sup>2</sup> At the end of April, [Turkish officials](#) summoned HTS representatives to Turkey, where they were told to disband and join the Syrian Liberation Front or a police force. Those who refused would be killed. These options went against Turkey's agreement with HTS in October 2017, when, in return for HTS protection and guidance in aiding Turkish soldiers to enter Idlib and establish observation posts, Turkey pledged not to use its Syrian militias against HTS, and not to interfere with HTS' administrations or security. At the April meeting, [HTS](#) told Turkey that HTS would only dissolve if all other militias dissolved and formed one organisation. It was unclear whether this organisation would be subservient to Turkey, given HTS and others have their own funding sources.

In May, Turkey negotiated a [ceasefire](#), and on 28 [May 2018](#), announced a new coalition, the [National Liberation Front](#), which was an amalgamation of the Syrian Liberation Front and other militias, but excluded HTS. All vowed to defend the revolution by fighting the regime and [Kurdish 'terrorists'](#). Three days later, on May 31, the US State Department amended its [designation](#) of *al-Nusra* as a terrorist organisation to include HTS.

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<sup>2</sup> See KLA's Report on [Turkey's links with HTS, February 2018](#)

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Turkey's effort to unite militias was also about preventing the regime from making further inroads into Idlib. Back in December – January, Russian-backed pro-regime forces took control of towns, villages and the military airbase of Abu Duhur in the [southeast](#) of Idlib, and on [May 8](#), 2018, the Syrian Army stormed strongholds of *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* (formerly *al-Qaida*, then *al-Nusra*, and the lead militia in HTS) in southern Idlib, Aleppo and Hama. The Syrian Army planned to seal the border between Latakia and Turkey by regaining control of Jisr al-Shughour, a notorious centre for Islamist extremist militants in western Idlib near the Akcakale border crossing with Hatay. To prevent this, on [May 16](#), Turkey established its 12<sup>th</sup> observation post at Jisr al-Shughour and on [May 26](#), a convoy of Turkish soldiers and proxy militants entered Latakia, resulting in them and the Syrian Army exchanging missile and artillery fire. By May 31, Turkey had set up a [13th observation](#) post in Latakia, which was outside the Astana agreement. The Assad regime insisted that Turkish forces withdraw from Syria, and on May 31 and June 1, [Russia](#) launched airstrikes in southern Idlib and northern Hama. These were [followed](#) by a Russian-backed ground offensive that fought HTS in northeastern Idlib, despite the proximity of Turkish forces. By [June 12](#), Syrian artillery was targeting opposition strongholds at al-Lataminah in the south, and Markabah in the east, the latter eight kilometres from a Turkish observation post at Murak.

In June and [July](#), HTS, the Turkestan Islamic Party and other militias [attacked](#) pro-regime forces in Latakia, and launched [armed drone attacks on Russia's Khmeimim airbase](#). On June 9 – 10, [HTS shelled the two regime-held towns](#) of Fuaa and Kafraya in the northeast.<sup>3</sup> HTS lay siege to the towns until July 17, when Russia and Turkey negotiated an evacuation deal, which included the release of [1,500 prisoners](#). Buses were sent in and an evacuation of up to 10,000 people was [completed](#) by July 19.

In [June](#), [ISIS](#) conducted numerous assassinations, and IED and bomb attacks in Idlib. For instance, on June 10, ISIS executed five HTS fighters. Assassinations [instigated by Turkey](#) or ISIS, and heavy firefights between militias continued, killing at least 163 people between [June 20 and June 27](#). After [militants kidnapped doctors for ransom](#), [doctors and pharmacists in Idlib city](#) went on a three day strike in late June, calling for the immediate release of all detained medical staff, for any arrest to have a written order from the judiciary, and for all militants be identified by uniform and ID cards. Living conditions were so unbearable that some recently arrived IDPs from eastern Ghouta returned home, paying up to \$5,000 for the privilege. Civilians resented and feared the militias, HTS and foreign fighters in particular. Protests were held in different towns, and in June, civilians appealed to the Turkey-backed administration to stop [Uzbeks, Chechens and Uighurs militants](#) looting and confiscating property. They got no response. [Civilians](#) in Ma'arat Al Numan and Saraqib resorted to posting notices on trees and telegraph poles: 'Termination of contract: all foreign fighters are not welcome'. Throughout [July](#) fighting between HTS

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<sup>3</sup> The planned evacuation of these towns in April 2017 was cut short by a devastating militia attack on a convoy of buses taking civilians out of these towns.





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and *Ahrar al-Sham/Nour al-Din al-Zinki* continued, and more HTS commanders were assassinated.

In May and June, regime helicopters dropped leaflets into the northwest de-escalation zone calling on all militias to disarm, and by mid-July, members of a peace committee claimed [500 villages and towns](#) had joined the regime's 'national peace plan' since negotiations began in early 2017. With the regime preparing for an offensive, Assad promised civilians and disarmed militants safe passage to regime-held areas, but [HTS and other militias began arresting people](#) wanting reconciliation.

At the Astana talks in Sochi at the end of July, Russian officials said that Russia would retaliate to any future attack on Russia's interests in Latakia, and on [August 13 - 14 Russia brought down](#) five armed drones near its airbase, claiming that 'outside experts' were involved in assembling and directing between [18](#) and [45 drones](#) launched in July and early August. After Sochi, [Russia's presidential special envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev](#) announced that a large-scale offensive on Idlib was 'out of the question', that the implementation of a prisoner and body exchange was a priority. In contrast, Syria's envoy to the UN, [Bashar Jaafari](#), warned that if negotiations failed, then Idlib would be taken militarily, street-by-street if need be. On August 4, [Russia allegedly gave Turkey until September 7](#) to eliminate or disband HTS and other 'terrorists' in Idlib. On this date representatives from Turkey, Russia, France and Germany will meet in Istanbul to discuss Syria and Iraq.

At the end of July, [Aldar Khalil](#), co-president of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), the main political coalition in the Syrian Democratic Council, and [Salih Muslim](#), a member of the Council, announced that the SDF could help the regime retake Idlib, in return for regime help to retake Afrin. In mid-August, the regime signalled that if Turkey did not 'co-operate' in [Idlib](#), it would ask the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) for assistance.

Turkey continued its efforts to unite opposition militias, and peel away militants from hardliners. On August 1 and August 15, more militias joined the [National Liberation Front](#)<sup>4</sup> giving it a strength of between 85,000 and [100,000 fighters](#) (i.e. more than HTS). A former Syrian Army officer, [Fadlallah al-Haji](#) was named commander-in-chief. Other commanders came from the Salafist *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jaish al-Nusra*. Although [HTS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham rejected](#) Turkey's offer to join the Front, or return to their countries of origin, in a second agreement HTS agreed to co-ordinate with the Front to defend [Idlib](#).

Turkey's ultimate intention is to amalgamate the National Liberation Front in Idlib with its Syrian 'National' Army in Aleppo. Turkey trains the militants, pays their salaries and provides logistics and ammunition, yet militia unity and loyalty to Turkey

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<sup>4</sup> The new Front includes 13 militias, among them *Faylaq al-Sham*, *Jaish al-Nasr*, the Free Idlib Army, the First and Second Coastal Divisions, the First and Twenty-Third Divisions, the Second Army, *Jaish al-Nukhba*, *Shuhada al-Islam Darayya*, *Al-Hurriyat* Brigade, *Suqour al-Sham* and *Jaish al-Ahrar*, as well as the two militias in the [Syrian Liberation Front](#). Many took part in [Operation Olive Branch](#).

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is far from assured. Many oppose the Astana process, and some claim Turkey's fight against Kurds and Kurdish [autonomy](#) goes against the revolution. The head of HTS, [Abu Mohammed al-Jolani](#), considers Turkey an unreliable ally. Others who oppose Turkey's presence in Syria are HTS militants who split from the main group in 2017 and formed a coalition of like-minded militias. The coalition is called the Religious Guardians' Organization, or [Hurras al-Din](#) or [Tanzim Hurras al-Din](#).

In the first 21 days of August, [clashes between HTS and the National Liberation Front intensified](#). [Syrian missile and artillery units](#) exchanged heavy fire with [HTS in Latakia](#), Aleppo and Idlib, and Syria used [barrel bombs on villages](#) and towns, including [al-Tah](#). On [August 10](#), a day after Syrian helicopters dropped notices asking the population to surrender, Syria and Russia began conducting airstrikes over southern Idlib. It appeared that Assad was preparing a full-scale offensive, with the elite Tiger Forces arriving in Hama, others arriving near [Jisr al-Shughour](#) and along the demarcation line. [Opposition militias likewise reinforced their side of the demarcation line](#), refusing Russian offers of a political dialogue. Between August 7 and 21, [HTS and National Liberation Front militias allegedly arrested more than 500 civilians and militia commanders](#) who wanted to negotiate. With regime forces continuing to bombard the Turkestan Islamic Party and HTS in Zayzoun and Jisr al-Shughour, on [August 12](#), [Erdogan](#) promised to 'liberate' more areas in Syria, making them 'safe zones' so refugees could return, and an HTS weapons storage site in the basement of a residential building in Sarmada, near the Turkish border, was blown up by unknown perpetrators, killing [69 people, including 52 civilians](#). Among the civilians were at least [12 children](#) and nine women. Elsewhere, ISIS killed militants at HTS checkpoints. In retaliation, HTS published images of six ISIS fighters being executed. In the south, airstrikes and barrel bombs killed 'dozens' of civilians, causing [4,000](#) to flee. Most escaped through a temporary regime-created corridor at Abu Duhur, although HTS [blocked](#) 'some' from leaving.<sup>5</sup> By August 21, Turkey alleged that [1,500 SDF fighters](#) had arrived south Aleppo; the US, UK and France vowed to respond to another regime chemical attack; [Russia](#) warned that HTS in Jisr al-Shughour were planning a chemical attack that would be blamed on the regime; and on August 23, [three Russian warships](#) headed for Tartus. The war is not over.

## Scenarios for Idlib

Russia and Turkey want to prevent a full-scale regime offensive in Idlib. There are five basic scenarios: the first two rely on negotiations, the third relies on a limited regime offensive, and the last two involve a full-scale offensive. In regards to the last three options, in early July, Turkey warned that any attack on Idlib was a [red line](#) that would void the Astana process.

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<sup>5</sup> The Northern Syrian Response team, responsible for documenting IDP movements, claims this number of people fleeing is Russian propaganda. The team claims only 20 families left through the corridor, [paying large fees](#) to enter regime-held areas.

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**Scenario One:** Back in April, there was speculation that Idlib could be divided into two zones, with Turkey overseeing a northern zone, including Idlib city (which HTS administers) and the demarcation line. This would give Turkish forces access to Kurdish-held towns in northern Aleppo. The Assad regime would oversee a zone south of the demarcation line, with Russia allowing the required regime advance.

**Scenario Two:** Throughout July, [multiple](#) reports suggested that [Turkey was trying to convince Russia](#) to leave Idlib and Aleppo for Turkey to establish a united civil administration and security force comprising all opposition militias willing to hand in their [heavy weapons](#) to the Turkish Army. Turkey would then embark on reconstruction so refugees could return to Syria, in keeping with Russia's wish. Some reports claimed Turkey wanted to include eastern Aleppo city in this protectorate.

Scenarios One and Two could be the outcome of HTS being temporarily absorbed into Turkey's National Liberation Front, to regroup at a later date. An indication that HTS could be moving in this direction came on August 17, when HTS ordered the dismantling of its [Sharia Councils](#) in Hama. Either scenario would produce another Turkey-occupied territory contiguous with Afrin. Both scenarios delay a reckoning with hardline militants, Turkey's militia armies and Turkey's Islamist enclaves, with Russia insisting that all territory must come under regime control. Nor do these scenarios solve the problem of what to do with non-compliant and foreign militants. In the past, they were taken to Idlib. In Idlib these militants can be killed, most likely by Turkey's proxies, who would expect payback in the form of administrative and military control of territory, albeit subservient to Turkey. A second option is they could go to Turkey. Turkey opposes this, fully aware that these Islamist extremists would pose a security threat for Turkey, and beyond. A better option for Turkey would be moving non-compliant militants to Turkey-occupied northern Aleppo (including Afrin) and east of the Euphrates. Russia apparently [rejected](#) this option. The US would also oppose this move. The Assad regime would probably consider that the risk of Turkey trying to establish another Sunni Islamist enclave in the northeast outweighs the benefits of destabilising SDF-held territory.

**Scenario Three:** In August, there was talk of dividing Idlib into small de-escalation zones and humanitarian [corridors](#). Russia would convince Assad to limit the offensive to a gradual diminishment of HTS territory until all foreign fighters and other non-compliant militants were contained in the northwest. Turkey would [remove its observation posts](#) from these areas, and Turkey's proxies and Assad's forces would co-ordinate to eliminate these 'terrorists' (as what occurred in Daraa). Russia would help Turkey prevent extremists from entering Turkey and negotiate or [buy the co-operation](#) of Syrians among the 'terrorists', as it did in other de-escalation zones. As opposition militants are not given the option of returning to civilian life, cooperation would mean militants agreeing to being conscripted into the Syrian Army, or signing a five year contract to join a local police force, in both cases after a re-education program, or agreeing to join one of the better paid Iran-linked or Russian-backed militias, thus remaining outside state control. Although such cooperation seems

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unlikely while Assad remains in power, HTS has been pragmatic in strategy. Back in 2016, it split with al-Qaida, and proclaimed itself 'moderate' and nationalist'.

The [Russian and Turkish foreign ministers met on August 14](#), but could not agree on who were [terrorists](#), or a joint approach to HTS, *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* and others in Idlib. Turkey remained stridently opposed to a full-scale offensive, arguing that it would lead to a civilian [massacre](#). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia supported the Assad regime's right to militarily deal with 'terrorists', basically [pressuring Turkey](#) to fast track the elimination or absorption of non-compliant militants, or withdraw from Idlib.

Turkey hopes Russia values Turkey's contribution to the Astana process and their increasing military and energy ties enough to prevent or delay [a full-scale offensive](#). For instance, Russia could refuse air support, without which, Turkey hopes that the much weakened Syrian Army, even if backed by Iran-linked militias, would not attempt to take on the second largest armed force in NATO, which is supported by a government determined to annex northern Syria. On the flip side, Russia does not want on-going threats to its Latakia airbase and other interests, and knows it may not [be able to restrain](#) a regime fresh from victory in the south, that knows time is running out: the Astana process is near its end, the Syrian state faces bankruptcy, US sanctions on Russia and Iran could impact their support, and the UN, US and others insisting on a political transition.

In the event of a full-scale offensive, there are two scenarios, each with multiple outcomes. The first entails Turkey reinforcing and expanding its positions across Idlib, and, with help from its proxies, defending Idlib in the name of protecting civilians. The second scenario requires Turkey to withdraw before an offensive.

**Scenario Four:** Back in July, there were 1,200 Turkish soldiers positioned across 12 observation posts in Idlib and one in Latakia. Six of Turkey's observation posts are within 35 kilometres of its border with Syria, the most distant being 88 kilometres from the border. Ten posts are on the demarcation line between opposition-held and regime-held territory, with only one Turkish military company at each post. To withstand attacks by the Religious Guardians' Organization and/or a regime advance, Turkey has installed [mobile telecommunication towers](#), [cement walls](#) around each post, [air defence systems](#) and sent in reinforcements. Turkey has also built a helicopter airfield and two [army hospitals](#), and could supply opposition militias with [MANPADS](#). The arrival of a Turkish Army convoy in Hatay province on August 18, that included upgraded [M60T tanks](#) and advanced weapons, indicated that [Turkey was preparing to defend Idlib](#), at least to some extent, despite this putting Turkish soldiers in danger of airstrikes, the Syrian Army (possibly backed by Iran-backed militias and/or the YPG), and Islamist hardliners, including ISIS. For Turkey's defence of Idlib to succeed the opposition militias would need to be united, and Russia would need to withdraw its support from the Assad regime, (i.e. not just Assad). This is highly unlikely. This scenario would result in massive casualties among a civilian population that Turkey was tasked to protect, and many local councils and civilians

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would surrender to the regime. Hundreds of thousands of people would flee the conflict zones. The UN has requested Turkey to accept them, appearing to underestimate the dangers of Islamist extremist militants flowing into Turkey. In the likely event that Turkey refuses to open its high tech concrete border wall, the only option is for IDPs to escape to regime-controlled areas, or to Afrin, the Euphrates Shield triangle and east of the Euphrates. In the unlikely event that Turkey succeeded in defending Idlib, Turkey would [annex the province](#). The more likely scenario is that Turkey would fail to withstand a costly, possibly protracted Russian-backed war, (which has implications for NATO), and would be forced to withdraw.

**Scenario Five:** An alternative scenario is that Russia convinces Turkey to withdraw from Idlib before a full-scale offensive. Turkey could still supply opposition militias through Turkey-occupied Afrin and northern Aleppo. However, a withdrawal from Idlib has implications for Turkey's occupation of Afrin and the Euphrates Shield triangle and Turkey's wish to take control of Tel Rifaat and Manbij, and expand east of the Euphrates to the Iraqi border. It also has implications for the Astana process, and Turkey's influence over Syria's future. Unless given face saving incentives, Erdogan will resist pursuing this path.

If reason prevails, the least destructive and most sustainable option is Scenario Three, although in all scenarios, those who have put their trust in Turkey, and Turkey's 'enemies' (the YPG, SDF and PYD) have a lot to lose. This leads some analysts to conclude there will be no negotiated political transition in Syria. But then in late August, the US State Department announced the appointment of two envoys to re-energise the Geneva process, negotiate with Turkey, Jordan and others, and oversee SDF-secured territory. Even so, unless the international community uses maximum leverage to (1) prevent a full-scale offensive on Idlib and (2) speed up a political transition (e.g. by convincing Russia that Assad needs to be replaced), Syria will remain fertile ground for civil and regional war.

## Turkey's occupation of northern Aleppo

Whether or not a full-scale offensive on Idlib proceeds, civilians, particularly Kurds, will suffer if [Turkey](#) is allowed to permanently occupy or expand its occupation of Syria. This is born out in reports by:

- Kurdish Lobby Australia ([January 22](#); [March 16](#); [March 20](#); [May 21](#) and [July 9](#))
- [Human Rights Watch, 14 June 2018](#);
- [OHCHR Report for June, 2018](#);
- [German Society for Threatened Peoples](#), July 2018; and
- [Amnesty International, 2 August 2018](#).

Amnesty International concluded that as the 'occupying power', Turkey was responsible for the ongoing serious human rights abuses in Afrin that were being carried out mostly by Turkey-backed militias, despite the heavy presence of Turkish

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soldiers. The report provides evidence for arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, looting, confiscation of property, and the taking over of all but one school for use by the military and police. The report concludes 'Without further delay, Turkey must end violations by pro-Turkish armed groups, hold perpetrators accountable, and commit to helping Afrin residents rebuild their lives.'

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' (OHCHR) warns that if Turkey is allowed to expand its occupation of northern Syria more areas could be effected by the abuses perpetrated by Turkey-backed militias. [Joe Carle](#) writes: 'Dr. David Edelstein ... points to three key factors required for an occupation to succeed. First, the occupied population must recognize the need to be occupied. Second, the occupier and the occupied must mutually recognize a common threat to the occupied territory. Finally, there must be a credible belief among the occupied that the occupier will withdraw and return control of the territory to an indigenous government in a timely manner.' The Turkish occupation fails on all accounts.

To underline why it is essential for the Turkish military to withdraw from Syria and for Turkey to stop supporting Islamist extremist militias, the following provides an update on what is happening in Afrin, the Euphrates Shield triangle and Manbi.

## Afrin

On [May 16](#) Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Recep Akdağ reiterated that Turkey would never return Afrin to the Assad regime. Overseen by Turkish forces, and [1,000 former \*Faylaq al-Rahman\* militants](#) acting as police, Turkey-backed militants, and in some cases Turkish soldiers, continue to commit human rights abuses in Afrin. Abuses committed in July and August (since KLA's last report) include:

- Half of Afrin's original population remain displaced;
- Detention of up to [6,000 Afrin citizens](#), with on-going [mass arrests](#) and [kidnappings](#) often for [ransom](#), sometimes repeatedly to the one person;
- [Torture](#), at [times](#) causing [death](#), including to [more than one family member](#);
- Numerous [examples](#) of [Turkish soldiers and militants attacking villages](#), [breaking into houses](#) and [beating people](#), sometimes [killing a person inside their home](#), looting property, and taking away tens of people, including [women and children](#), to unknown locations;
- Militants taking possession of farms, then forcing the farm owner to work on the land; confiscated farms being converted to Turkish, [Turkey-backed militia](#), and [Jaish al-Islam](#) military bases and Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants burning [farms](#) and [olive trees](#), [destroying peoples' livelihoods](#);
- Property owners being ordered to [submit evidence of property purchase](#) to the Turkey-appointed Afrin City Council;
- YPG [General Command](#) accusing militants of dressing in YPG uniforms and proceeding to abuse people and steal property;

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- Turkey-backed [militants taxing shopkeepers](#), and civilians at checkpoints;
- Militants stealing electrical cables and four of six pumps at [Maydanaki Dam](#);
- On-going [Arabisation](#) of Afrin, with Kurdish road signs being taken down, Nowruz Square, Kawa Square and Seray Square in Afrin city being [renamed](#) Salahaddin al-Ayoubi Square, Martyrs' Square and Recep Tayyip Erdogan Square, and the removal of the Kurdish language from the school curriculum;
- Ongoing Islamisation of Afrin with the imposition of strict [Sharia law](#), Yezidi buildings and books, and a statue of Zoroaster being destroyed in Afrin city, and [Yezidi children](#) being forced to attend Quran lessons and a mosque. If parents refuse they are detained and tortured; and
- The destruction of historical sites, such as the excavation and construction on the 2,400-year old archaeological site of [Nabi Huri \(Cyrrhus\)](#).

Inter-militia fighting continues, resulting in casualties on both sides, and civilian casualties. On July 21, and [July 28](#), [Turkey-backed Ahrar al-Sharqiyah](#) and *Katibeh al-Farouq* clashed over stolen property being distributed in the Euphrates Shield triangle. On July 26, heavy fighting between *al-Jibhat al-Shamiyeh*, *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Ahrar al-Sharqiyeh* erupted in Jinderes. On [August 1](#), militants fought over loot in Rajou. On [4 August](#), clashes between Turkey-backed militants in Afrin city led to 'tens' of casualties on each side. Afrin's commercial centre was closed and a curfew imposed. On August 14, [heavy fighting](#) occurred between *Ahrar al-Sharqiyeh* and eastern Ghouta militants in Afrin city. On August 25, [Ahrar al-Sharqiyah militants](#) opened fire on each other after arguing about the distribution of loot in Afrin city.

Some human rights abuses relate to civilians fighting back after repeated abuses, and retaliation for an on-going Kurdish insurgency against Turkey's occupation. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) claims YPG committed [98 attacks](#) on Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militias between March 18 and the end of July. In clashes and attacks, at least 1,542 Kurdish fighters, 609 Turkey-backed militants, and 83 Turkish soldiers were killed. In the first week of August, [three YPG operations](#) killed two Turkish soldiers and four militants, and injured another ten. In the second week of August, two YPG operations in Afrin city killed ten militants from the notorious [al-Hamza Brigade](#), and injured another twenty.

### **Euphrates Shield Triangle (Azaz – Jarablus – al-Bab)**

Harrassment and the shooting of civilians, robberies, abductions, assassinations, car bombings, IED explosions and inter-militia fighting continue to occur in the Euphrates Shield triangle, mainly perpetrated by Turkey-backed militias, as reported by the OHCHR in June. Examples of violence include at least 10 people being severely wounded by a car bomb in Jarablus on [July 7](#); several people, including two children becoming casualties of a motorcycle bomb in al-Bab on July 8, and a [bomb-laden motorbike exploding in a Jarablus](#) market, killing one woman and injuring three children on August 14.

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On July 19, [Turkey-backed militias clashed in Jarablus](#), both sides incurring casualties. On August 3, [Omar al-Kadro](#), a commander of the 51st Brigade, was kidnapped from the Euphrates Shield main base in al-Bab. Days of heavy fighting erupted between the 51st and Sultan Murad brigades. Kadro's corpse was found in Jinderes (Afrin) five days after his kidnap. On August 5, unknown assailants attacked a graduation ceremony for new recruits in Al-Bab. On August 6, various [Turkey-backed militias](#) in Jarablus and Tadif (near al-Bab) exchanged heavy fire. Such is the intensity of the infighting and the number of civilian deaths, in mid-August, head of the Turkey-backed Syrian 'National' Army, [Colonel Haitham Afisi](#), ordered militants to stop 'randomly opening fire', and to wear uniforms and cooperate with military police. Factions were banned from making extrajudicial arrests and operating their own courts and prisons. Some days later, hundreds of civilians staged protests and went on strike in different towns. They [demanded that Turkey-backed militants leave the region](#) and the [local administrations be dismantled](#).

Turkey has introduced post offices, the Turkish lira, and the Turkish language in schools. It continues to recruit people into the Syrian 'National' Army and police forces. An unknown number are benefitting from Turkey's major infrastructure projects, including the building of roads, hospitals and [high-rise apartments](#), and the establishment of civil society groups. For instance, in late July, a [Federation of Free Syndicates](#) was formed from syndicates of lawyers, teachers, pharmacists, engineers, media and a Sharia Council to 'uphold the revolution'. But Turkey is Arabising and Islamising the region. Nor does it have sufficient control over the militias it supports.

## **Manbij**

Further east is the contested town of Manbij in the district of Manbij, which had a 2004 population of 408,000. The US-led coalition, SDF and Manbij Military Council liberated Manbij in August 2016. In March 2017, the Manbij Administrative Assembly was established with 71 Arabs, 43 Kurds, ten Turkmen, eight Circassians, an Armenian and a Chechen, reflecting local demographics. Turkey accuses both councils of being affiliated with YPG, SDF and PYD 'terrorists' and repeatedly threatens Manbij militarily. To protect the town, the US-led coalition established a demarcation line at the Sajur River, 24 kilometres northwest of the city.

In Manbij city, tensions rose in May as a result of a [SDF military conscription campaign](#), [pro-Turkish sleeper cells](#) planting IEDs, and the Turkish Army targeting villages with [artillery fire](#). On June 4, Turkish Foreign Minister Melvut Cavusoglu and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met to discuss Manbij's security and administration arrangements, and established working groups to develop a road map. The US [State Department](#) insisted that any agreement was conditions-based, but US Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis predicted that there would 'probably (be) some kind of [collaborative patrols](#) inside the pocket.' [Manbij Military Council](#) was not consulted and claimed it would not accept Turkish forces inside the 'pocket'.



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Separate Turkish and US-led coalition patrols on either side of the demarcation line commenced on June 18. Despite attacks on [July 23](#), and four [attacks](#) in [August](#) targeting SDF fighters and the Manbij Military Court, on [August 17](#) Mattis announced that training for joint patrols would begin 'soon'.

According to the US State Department, Turkish and US patrols are about reducing tensions, and establishing local self-government and security, despite the State Department saying that the current councils have done a good job in maintaining stability, and that the US will help defend that stability from destabilising influences, naming ISIS, Turkey and the Assad regime as potential destabilisers. Turkey continues to insist that the current councils must change, and has a [list](#) of people it wants on the councils, which Turkey wants overseen by the Turkey-funded [Syrian National Coalition](#) that administers the Euphrates Shield triangle.

In June, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said, '[Neither Turkey nor the US](#) has the right to negotiate the [fate of] Syrian cities.' [Russia](#) remained silent, intent on gaining Turkey's co-operation in Idlib, and hoping the agreement would undermine Kurds' faith in the US. Six days after the Pompeo-Cavusoglu meeting, the Syrian Democratic Council announced it was willing to enter negotiations with the regime.

With ISIS having a negligible presence in Manbij, observers claim the Manbij agreement was more about prying Turkey away from Russia, and preventing the Assad regime from reclaiming northern Aleppo and territory east of the Euphrates. [Some](#) suggest that the US could be planning a wider NATO force across northern Syria. [Others argue](#) that the US must accommodate Turkey by establishing joint Turkey-US supported administrations across northern Syria that exclude the PYD.

## Political Negotiations

### **Negotiations between the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and the regime**

The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, and the Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor local councils administer about 30 percent of Syrian territory. All but Afrin and Manbij are east of the Euphrates River. This SDF-secured territory includes Syria's main hydroelectric dams, oil and gas fields, and wheat growing areas. Back in May, the Kurds were allegedly advised not to negotiate with the regime, as it seeks to return to the pre-2011 [status quo](#). Then came the Manbij 'agreement' and increased uncertainty about US strategy, Russian-US-Israeli negotiations related to Iran's presence in Syria, and the regime's successful offensive in Daraa and Quneitra. In the second half of July, the [Tabqa Civilian Council](#), with SDF support, asked the regime to send engineers to fix the damaged turbines of the Euphrates Dam near Tabqa (which the SDF liberated from ISIS in May 2017), to get the dam fully operational. The regime demanded regime security accompany its engineers and

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workers, but Tabqa Council and the SDF [refused](#) this. Within days, regime engineers began work on the dam.

On July 16, the same day Putin and Trump met in Helsinki, the Syrian Democratic Council and SDF met with local councils and some opposition groups in Tabqa to discuss a unified administration of SDF-secured territory, and a platform on which to negotiate with the regime. At the invitation of the regime, on July 27, the Syrian Democratic Council and SDF held preliminary talks with officials in Damascus (after meeting with US Presidential Envoy to Syria, Brett McGurk). It was decided to establish joint [committees](#) to negotiate [military, security, economic, service and legal issues](#). The Syrian Democratic Council insisted the initial focus be on restoring water, electricity, health and education services east of the Euphrates, preferring to delay negotiations on the regime regaining control of the borders, security, and oil and gas. Saleh Muslim, a member of the Syrian Democratic Council, said that future negotiations required [international mediators](#). The Council's position was that nothing would be handed to the regime until it agreed to a [federal state](#). The SDF would then consider being integrated into the [Syrian Army](#).

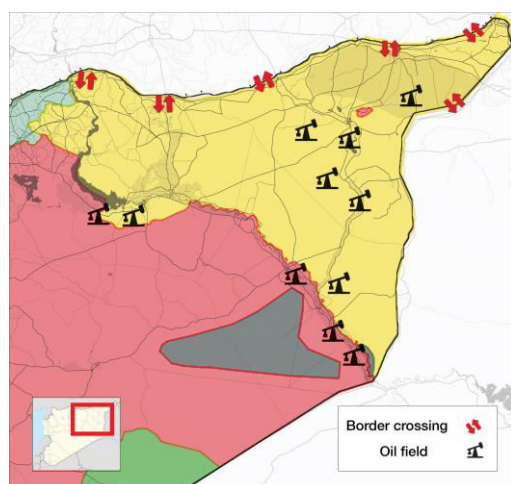


Figure 2: [Map](#) of northeast Syria showing oil fields and border crossings

After the Damascus meeting, and [consultations](#) with those who did not attend, as a goodwill gesture, the [SDF invited Syrian government officials to Raqqa](#) to collect the bodies of [44 Syrian soldiers](#) killed by ISIS, which had been recently found in a mass grave near Ain Issa. Following a US-sponsored meeting to discuss democratic decentralisation [in Ain Issa](#), a second delegation held meetings in [Damascus](#) on [August](#) 14. This time, regime officials asked that local councils east of the Euphrates participate in Syria's local council elections in September, and insisted that SDF-secured territory come under regime control. The SDF/Syrian Democratic Council delegation declined both offers, saying its structure of self-governance needs to be [enshrined in a new constitution](#) before they participated in elections. The response was 'not positive'. According to one unconfirmed report, Syrian security forces issued arrest warrants for members of the delegation, but Russia intervened and sent them back to Qamishli on a cargo plane.

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Both Russia and the US support these negotiations. They enable Russia to put pressure on Turkey in Idlib, and give the US a lever with Turkey, which continues to fiercely oppose any form of autonomy in northeast Syria. How the question of autonomy is resolved will depend on international support, particularly from Russia and the US, with the issue impacting not only Kurds and their allies, but also Druze in the southwest, and Sunni Arabs. Both Assad and Turkey need to be convinced. Incentives for Turkey to accept a federal system would be the potential for one or more Sunni Arab autonomous regions, and a role in reconstruction.

If Assad remains in power, any regime concessions to the Syrian Democratic Council will likely be about biding time until the regime is in a better position to resume centralised control, by force if need be. Evidence of the regime's underlying position came in mid-August, after Saudi Arabia pledged \$100 million and the UAE, Australia and other countries pledged \$200 million for stabilisation in SDF-secured territory. A [Syrian Government spokesperson claimed that the Saudi's pledge](#) was 'morally unacceptable' as it was an attempt to prevent 'the Syrian Arab Army from achieving further victories over terrorism in northern Syria' and that this threatens Syria's unity. Officials called on the US-led coalition 'to withdraw from Syria without delay because it serves only terrorists and murderers.'

In August, the [US State Department](#) reaffirmed the US' commitment to northeast Syria, and a UN-aided political solution with the appointment of the former ambassador to Iraq and Turkey, James Jeffrey, as a special representative for Syrian engagement, tasked with kick starting the Geneva process and the appointment of retired Colonel Joel Rayburn, former member of the National Security Council. Otherwise, the US faces critical decisions about how much it is prepared to protect and support the administrative and security structures in Manbij and east of the Euphrates. Any decrease in support will jeopardise stabilisation, leave the Kurds vulnerable to attack, and validate Sunni Arab scepticism of US intentions. The spectrum of alternatives include on-going co-ordinated investment for stabilisation during a political transition, through to official recognition of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and associated local councils, and the establishment of a no-fly zone, so the region continues to be a US-led coalition base for fighting ISIS and leveraging Syria, Iran, Turkey and Iraq.

### **Broader Negotiations**

At an aid conference for Syria held in Brussels on [April 24-25](#), UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura said, 'The initiatives led by Russia have reached their limit.' Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) held a different view, saying that the de-confliction zones had to be consolidated and all opposition split from 'terrorists'.

On May 14 – 15, Astana IX was held with delegations from the Assad regime, Opposition and UN. The US did not attend. Head of the regime delegation, [Bashar](#)

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[Jaafari](#), re-emphasised that his government intended to reclaim all of Syria. The Astana troika issued a joint statement reaffirming the territorial integrity of Syria, the need to fight terrorism, and the 'success' of the de-escalation zones in building 'confidence' between parties. Head of the opposition delegation, Ahmad Tu'mah, observed that Moscow was exerting pressure on the regime to accept a political settlement. This was borne out on May 17, when [Assad met Putin in Sochi](#) and at last [agreed](#) to the formation of a constitution committee. At the end of May, the regime [supplied](#) a list of names to Staffan De Mistura, although Assad continues to [reject Russia's proposal](#) for a new constitution that increases decentralisation and reduces the powers of the president.

Also in May, [China hosted its first international conference on Syria](#). In attendance were the UN, and officials and scholars from the US, UK, France, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and Qatar. China supports an immediate ceasefire and a Syrian-led political transition, followed by an incremental approach to reconstruction, to which the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and One Belt One Road initiative could contribute.

In June, Staffan de Mistura travelled between countries to build support for the constitution committee. [Mistura](#) claimed common ground was emerging, despite the Opposition insisting that negotiations be in accordance with UN [Resolution 2254](#), (requiring a new constitution, the creation of a non-sectarian transitional government and elections) and the regime demanding its representatives form a majority on the committee. Russia again argued that Kurds of different persuasions had to be represented, as Turkey has blocked PYD and SDF participation in all Geneva and Astana negotiations. Mistura would like to limit the committee to between [50](#) and [75](#) members, and for women to make up 30 percent of the [committee](#), as only two women are on the High Negotiations Committee and no women in the Opposition have attended Astana [meetings](#). However, the formation of the committee is a Russian idea. Some argue it is designed to bypass the formation of a transitional [government](#), while some propose that those who have overseen war crimes should be excluded from negotiations.

After US President Trump's meeting with Putin in Helsinki on July 16, Russia pushed for an internationally facilitated return of refugees and commitment to reconstruction, ignoring the established policy of the US and EU that UN Resolution 2254 must first be implemented. On its part, the [UN](#) announced that a UN facilitated return of refugees would be premature before the establishment of a Syrian ministry to oversee an orderly return and reintegration, the development of legal protection and dispute resolution mechanisms, and a comprehensive housing policy. Otherwise, a mass return of refugees would contribute to more instability, internal displacement and arrests.

After preliminary negotiations between the regime and the 'Democratic Autonomous Administrations' on July 27, Astana X was held in Sochi on July 30 – 31, again with no US observer. The priority of Astana X was to approve a list of

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candidates for the constitution committee and to negotiate a prisoner exchange. Idlib derailed matters. [Bashar Jaafari criticised Turkey](#) for not fulfilling its de-escalation duties, and for occupying Afrin and the Euphrates Shield triangle. In the [final statement](#) Idlib was not mentioned. The statement merely restated the need to preserve Syria's territorial integrity and Russia's wish for the international community to lift sanctions and support refugee returns and reconstruction. As a final touch, [Jamil al-Hassan](#), head of Syria's Air Force Intelligence Directorate, threatened to eradicate all Syrians who oppose the regime.

Apart from Russia wanting to control outcomes, a political transition has been hampered by a US focus on defeating ISIS and curbing Iran's presence, although these priorities would indicate that the US-led coalition is likely to [remain in Syria for some time](#). In August, the US appeared to refocus on a political transition, but unless the US seriously engages with Russia and other stakeholders there will be no political transition. Fundamental issues that require immediate attention are to:

- Find acceptable replacements for Assad and other war criminals without dismantling the state, thus providing an immediate incentive for opposition militias to dissolve, and Turkey and Iran to withdraw their military assets;
- Build a consensus on northern Syria, set practical parameters for a new constitution and ensure any constitutional negotiations are not hijacked by the Assad regime or the Turkey and Saudi-backed 'National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces';
- Establish mechanisms for a political transition and reconstruction; and
- Establish no-fly zones and consider the need for [international peacekeeping forces](#) to ensure internal and external border security.

## Reconstruction

The [UN estimates that reconstruction in Syria will cost \\$388 billion](#). Lucrative opportunities provide another lever to effect a political transition and the military withdrawal of Turkey and Iran from Syria. Assad hopes to [involve](#) Russia, Iran, China, Qatar, India, Brazil and some European states, having consistently said Syria will not accept participation from any country that supported the opposition. [Russia](#) knows the costs will require investment from wider sources, including from geographically and logistically well-placed countries like Turkey. Even Russia and [China](#) are hesitant to fund reconstruction until sanctions on Syria are lifted, and this requires a political transition. Only then will reconstruction be able to occur in regime-held areas and territory east of the Euphrates. In regards to the latter, UN institutions like the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and international NGOs have a limited presence due to access and security issues, and the need to be registered in Damascus. In their absence, local NGOs need to co-ordinate better, while a new internationally supported forum for NGOs, with connections to the UN regional office in Amman, is in the preliminary stages of reaching out to local authorities in [northeast Syria](#).