

North Syria Overview

Mid-March to Mid-April 2018

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Glossary

AOG	Armed Opposition Group
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GoT	Government of Turkey
GoS	Government of Syria
GoR	Government of Russia
IS	Islamic State
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Political wing of YPG and leading political party in Hasaka's 'Self-Administration')
YPG	Peoples Protection Unit
SDF	Syrian Democratic Force (mostly made up of and led by YPG forces, approximately 10% are from Arab tribes)
SLF	Syria Liberation Front (Arabic - Jabhat Tahrir Suriya, is an alliance of 'moderate' AOGs, notably Ahrar Al-Sham and Nourredine Al-Zinki)
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (alliance of 'extreme' AOGs, notably Jabhat al-Nusra)
WHO	World Health Organisation
NPM	Needs and Population Monitoring Program for Syria www.npm-syria.org

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

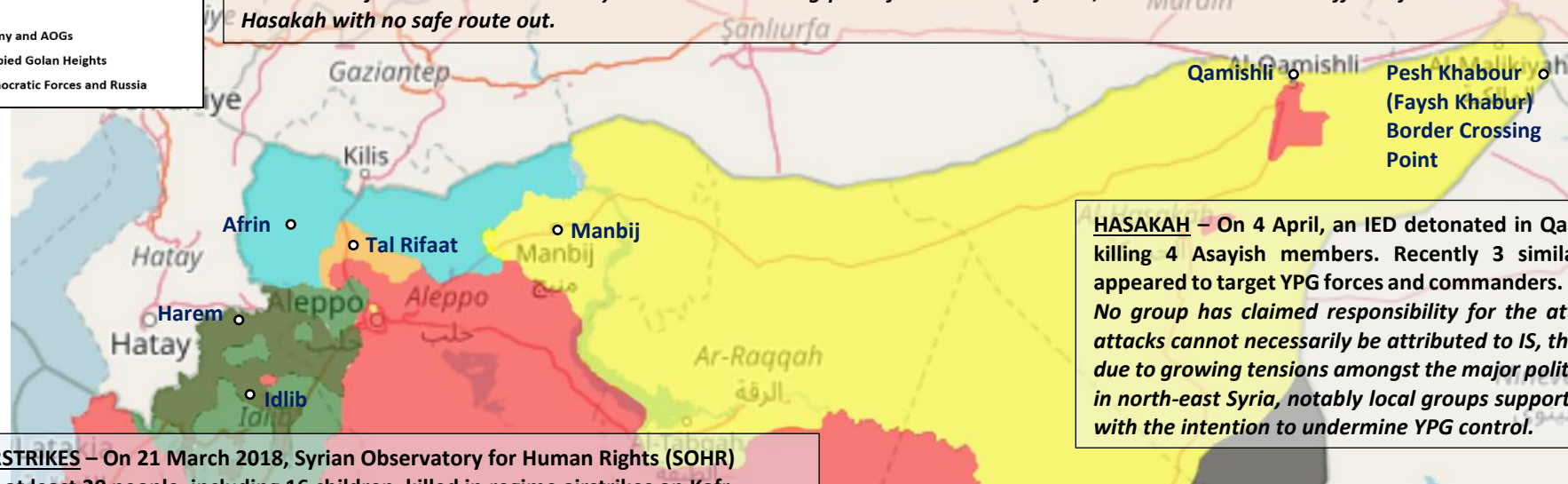
In the text when '*Comment: ...*' appears in *italics* and the subsequent text is also in *italics*, this information is not fact, but the opinion of the author.

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

1. Conflict and Security (Map as at 12th April 2018. Source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)

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

TURKEY/YPG BORDER CLASHES – Although the Turkish military continue to shoot small arms and artillery across the border into YPG controlled Syria, the number of incidents has reduced since Jan 2018 when over 68 incidents were reported. In March this had reduced to 40. Both YPG positions and civilians are targeted. One significant incident was on 26 March when 3 mortar rounds fired by Turkish forces impacted in the Quarry Area a few hundred meters north of the Pesh Khabour (Faysh Khabur) border crossing point. The indirect fire attack was reportedly targeting heavy machinery collecting gravel on the western bank of the Tigris River. *Comment: Should the GoT take its campaign against the YPG to the Hasakah region, then the Pesh Khabour (Faysh Khabur) border crossing point may be a strategic target for the Turks. It is also very vulnerable being only 4km south of the border with Turkey. Should the crossing point fall to Turkish forces, international INGO staff will find themselves isolated in Hasakah with no safe route out.*



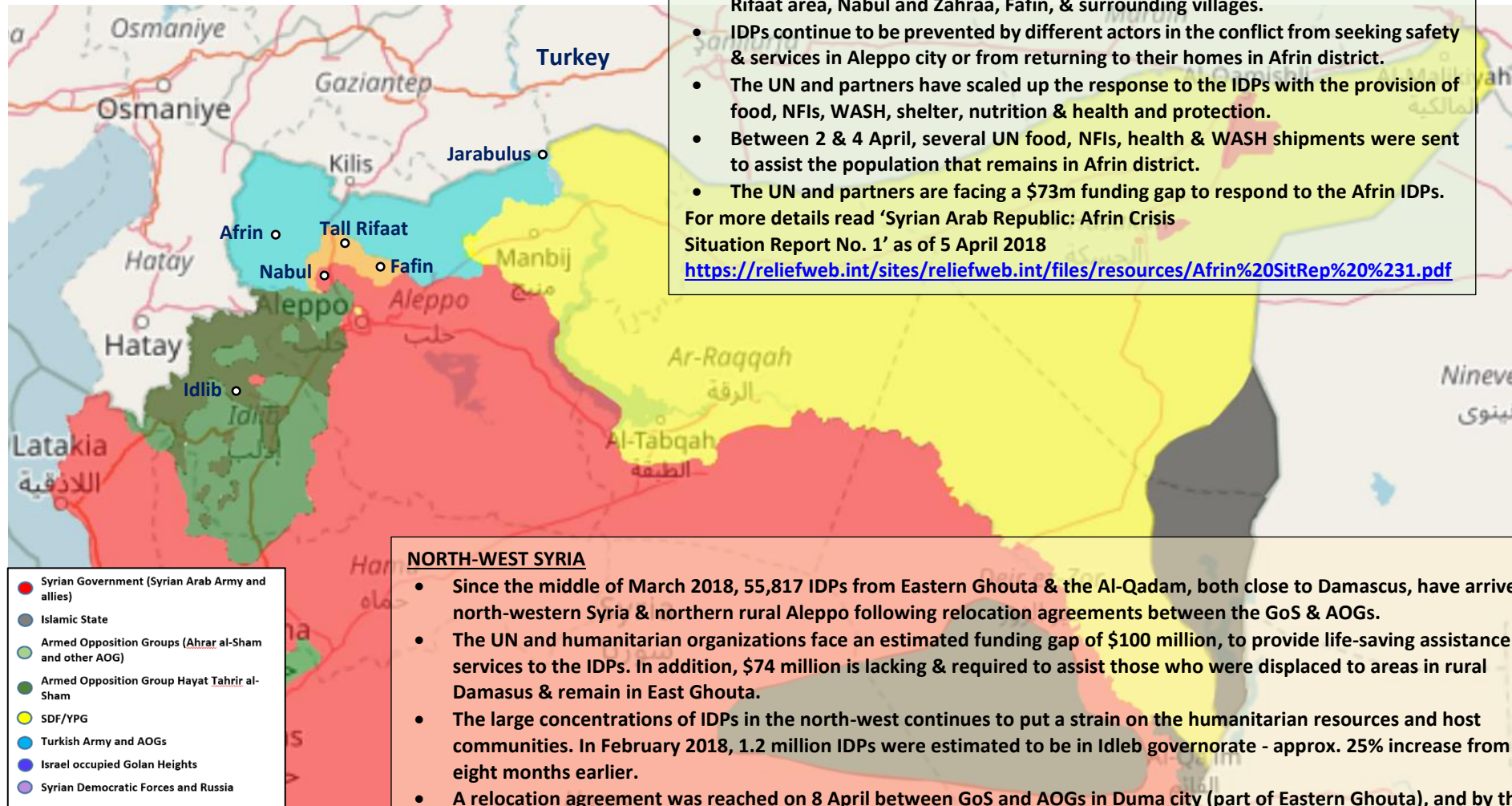
HASAKAH – On 4 April, an IED detonated in Qamishli city killing 4 Asayish members. Recently 3 similar attacks appeared to target YPG forces and commanders. *Comment: No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. The attacks cannot necessarily be attributed to IS, they may be due to growing tensions amongst the major political actors in north-east Syria, notably local groups supported by GoS with the intention to undermine YPG control.*

IDLIB AIRSTRIKES – On 21 March 2018, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported at least 20 people, including 16 children, killed in regime airstrikes on Kafr Batikh, Idlib Governorate. The children were reported to have been fleeing an earlier airstrike on their school & 15 of the 20 killed were from the same family. The following day airstrikes hit Harem, also in Idlib, killing at least 34 people, including 17 children. According to SOHR these attacks brought the death toll from airstrikes on Idlib to 63, including 40 children, since 20 Mar 2018. Airstrikes continued throughout Idlib on the days 30, 31 March, & 1, 5 April. *Comment: Now that fighting has ceased in Eastern Gauhta, the GoS's airforce are available for other operations. Further airstrikes in Idlib are expected.*

IDLIB AOG INFIGHTING – The ceasefire between HTS & SLF, negotiated on 16 March, collapsed on 22 March. Clashes took place between the 2 mostly in rural west Aleppo & north Idlib Governorate where SLF secured several villages. Between the 4 & 9 April further ceasefire negotiations took place, but fighting broke out again on 10 April in south and east parts of Idlib governorate as well as rural west Aleppo. *Comment: Clashes between the two AOGs are expected to continue, but more attempts at a ceasefire are likely. GoT siding with one group will probably be the deciding factor on who wins the conflict.*

TURKEY TAKES AFRIN – After a 2-month campaign Turkish troops & affiliated AOG fighters took the city of Afrin on 18 Mar 2018 from the Kurdish YPG. In the following days the Turks & AOGs took control of much of the Afrin district forcing the YPG into a small enclave around the town Tall Rifaat. Over 137,000 IDPs from Afrin are also reported to be in Tall Rifaat and near-by towns & villages (see page 3). In total the UN report the fighting has displaced the 180,000 people. YPG media stated the fight would continue in Afrin with hit-and-run guerrilla warfare. *Comment: The sudden collapse of the YPG opposition was a surprise and appears to have been a strategic decision to pull its fighters out of an unwinnable position and spare Afrin city from a battle of attrition. Unconfirmed reports tell of GoS forces allowing the YPG to travel through their territories onto Tall Rifaat and probably onto Manbij. Turkey's President Erdogan has been emphatic that Turkey and the affiliated AOG will take Tall Rifaat and Manbij, but surprisingly have not yet advanced. This could be due to the presence GoS militia near Tall Rifaat and the lack of an agreement with Russia to allow such a move at this moment.*

2. Humanitarian Situation (Map as at 12th April 2018. Source <http://syriacivilwarmap.com>)



AFRIN & NORTH ALEPPO

- Since 20 January 2018 an estimated 137,070 people were displaced to the Tall Rifaat area, Nabul and Zahraa, Fafin, & surrounding villages.
- IDPs continue to be prevented by different actors in the conflict from seeking safety & services in Aleppo city or from returning to their homes in Afrin district.
- The UN and partners have scaled up the response to the IDPs with the provision of food, NFIs, WASH, shelter, nutrition & health and protection.
- Between 2 & 4 April, several UN food, NFIs, health & WASH shipments were sent to assist the population that remains in Afrin district.
- The UN and partners are facing a \$73m funding gap to respond to the Afrin IDPs.

For more details read 'Syrian Arab Republic: Afrin Crisis Situation Report No. 1' as of 5 April 2018

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Afrin%20SitRep%20%231.pdf>

NORTH-WEST SYRIA

- Since the middle of March 2018, 55,817 IDPs from Eastern Ghouta & the Al-Qadam, both close to Damascus, have arrived in north-western Syria & northern rural Aleppo following relocation agreements between the GoS & AOGs.
- The UN and humanitarian organizations face an estimated funding gap of \$100 million, to provide life-saving assistance & services to the IDPs. In addition, \$74 million is lacking & required to assist those who were displaced to areas in rural Damascus & remain in East Ghouta.
- The large concentrations of IDPs in the north-west continues to put a strain on the humanitarian resources and host communities. In February 2018, 1.2 million IDPs were estimated to be in Idlib governorate - approx. 25% increase from eight months earlier.
- A relocation agreement was reached on 8 April between GoS and AOGs in Duma city (part of Eastern Ghouta), and by the 11 April 6 convoys had left from Duma city to Jarabulus Town in north-east Aleppo Governorate, an area controlled by Turkey and its affiliated AOGs. The total number of evacuees from Duma is around 11,500 people.

For more details, read 'Turkey | Syria: Situation in North-western Syria Situation Report No.2 (as of 10 April)'

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/20180410_situation_in_north_western_syria.pdf

3. Activities elsewhere in Syria (Map as at 12th April 2018. Source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)

POLITICS – On 4 Apr 2018, the presidents of Russia, Turkey & Iran - Putin, Erdogan, & Hassan Rouhani respectively - met in Ankara, Turkey as a continuation of the Astana talks on Syria. On completion of the meeting where they pledged to cooperate on the reconstruction and aid to Syria, & to maintain the country's territorial integrity. Erdogan added that Turkey will continue its current military campaign in north Syria until they “have made safe all areas controlled by the (YPG), starting with Manbij.” The previous week US President Trump announced US troops in Syria are to be pulled out, there are 2000 in areas controlled by the SDF; but after a meeting between Trump & his military advisors, the Whitehouse clarified it would be several months before the US troops mission would be complete and they would leave Syria.

Comment: Most analysts and commentators agree that the Ankara meeting was more concerned with coordinating of their involvement in the Syria conflict, thereby ensuring each leader gets what they want from Assad winning the war and staying in power. Russia wants to ensure it has access to the Mediterranean coast, retain sea and air bases in the country, & be the main influencer in Syria. Iran wants a clear land channel from Iranian border to the Mediterranean coast, through Iraq & Lebanon, so it can harass Israel and dominate the region. Turkey wants to eliminate the Kurdish YPG and through its AOG proxies control the area west of the Euphrates River to create space for the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey to return to. Also, all three want to see an end to US influence in region, and it seems President Trump is obliging them.

EASTERN QALAMOUN – Negotiations are currently underway between local councils of the main towns in Eastern Qalamoun and GoS representatives for a reconciliation & relocation agreement. Eastern Qalamoun is a region located some 40km north-east of Damascus. The area includes a few towns and a stretch of desert territory. The region has been under rebel control since 2013 with some 350,000 civilians, including IDPs who have fled Homs and Eastern Ghouta. *Comment: Recent GoS & Russian strategy has been to fight one battle at a time enabling the concentration of limited forces. In parallel with this is another strategy to avoid battles by simultaneously negotiating with & threatening the AOGs. With every relocation agreement made, the AOGs are weakened and territory is regained by the GoS.*

EASTERN GHOUTER – On 7 April, following stalled negotiations between the GoS and AOG in Duma city, the last pocket of AOGs in Eastern Ghouta, the GoS was accused of dropping chemical filled bombs on Duma. Reportedly, between 40 and 45 people were killed and over 500 injured. The GoS and GoR denied carrying out the attacks. The US, UK and France jointly stated those responsible must be held to account. A series of threats and counter threats then followed between the US President Trump and the GoR. *Comment: The US probably will launch missile attacks against military targets connected to the attack on Duma. For the GoS the attack had the desired effect and the following day the AOGs agreed to a relocation deal.*

SOUTH DAMASCUS – On 20 March 2018 in southern Damascus, after fierce clashes IS took control of al-Qadam district, located near the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, from GoS forces who lost a reported 96 fighters. The GoS had recently taken control of the neighbourhood from AOGs who withdrew following a relocation agreement.

Adjacent to al-Qadam are 3 neighbourhoods, Yalda, Beit Saham & Babbila, controlled by AOGs. The GoS & GoR are currently trying to broker an evacuation agreement with the AOGs who want to leave and a reconciliation for those who want to stay. *Comment: Reports of GoS troop movements suggest an offensive against IS in Yarmouk & al-Qadam soon. Some commentators believe it may be a joint offensive with AOGs in Yalda, Beit Saham & Babbila.*

AIRSTRIKE ON SYRIAN AIRBASE – On 9 April, several air-to-land missiles targeted the T4 Military airbase, in Homs governorate; reportedly killing several Iranian military personnel. The missiles were fired from Lebanese airspace & most probably the Government of Israel airforce. *Comment: Israel is concerned with the growing proximity of Iranian forces close to its border. Whilst in the past Israel has directly targeted Hezbollah, it has not targeted Iranian forces. This could indicate an escalation in tension between the two countries.*

