

North Syria Overview March 2019

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Glossary

FSA	Free Syrian Army
GoT	Government of Turkey
GoS	Government of Syria
GoR	Government of Russia
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IS	Islamic State
YPG	Kurdish Peoples Protection Unit
SDF	Syrian Democratic Force (mostly made up of and led by YPG forces, approximately 10% are from Arab tribes)
NLF	National Liberation Front (Arabic - Jabhat Tahrir Suriya. An alliance of 'moderate' AOGs supported by Turkey)
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (alliance of 'extreme' AOGs, notably Jabhat al-Nusra)

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Much of the text in this report is in *italic*. This is to illustrate that the contents are conjecture. Whilst the report reflects the current situation in northwest Syria, the analysis, views and opinions expressed are those of the author.

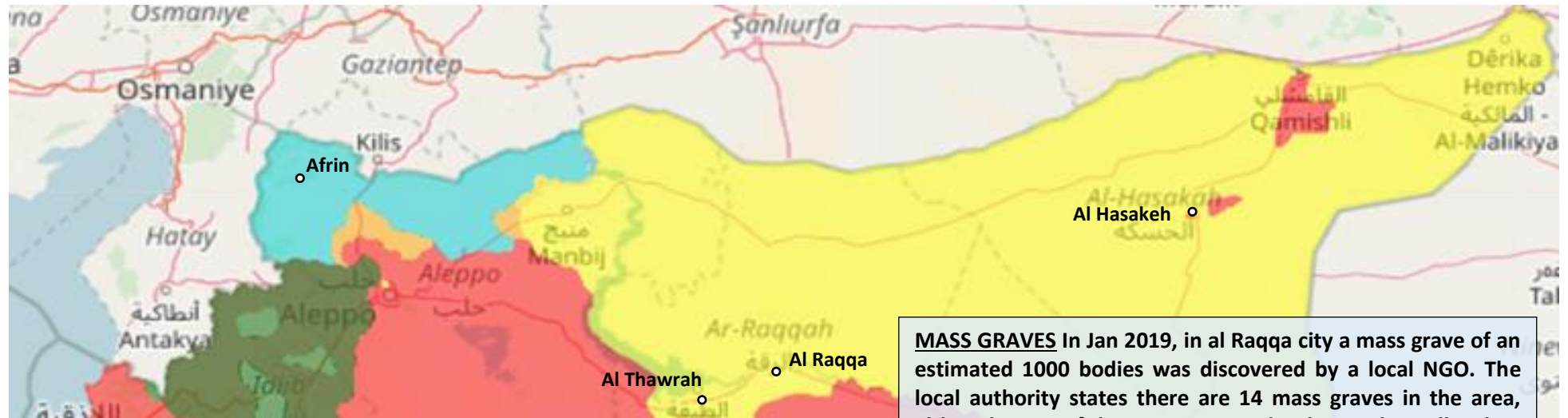
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GEOPOLITICS The geopolitics determining Syria's future continued through February, but there is little change to the situation despite a meeting between Presidents Putin and Erdogan, Russia and Turkey respectively, on the 23 Jan 2019, and another Sochi summit between the governments of Russia, Turkey and Iran on the 14 Feb. Whilst nothing substantial come from these meetings, it is significant that Erdogan did not get the approval for a large-scale incursion or a Safe Zone in northeast Syria. What Erdogan was given by Putin was the reviving of a 1998 bilateral anti-terror agreement between Turkey and Syria – this allows Turkey to conduct cross-border counter-terrorism operations in coordination with the Syrian military. The other major issue reportedly discussed at Sochi was the situation in Idlib governorate where HTS have secured control of what is the final enclave held by the opposition. Whilst no policy changes were announced, Putin released a statement in which he said the presence of terrorist groups in Idlib was not acceptable – HTS contains armed opposition groups that are prescribed terrorist organizations.

Later on the 21 Feb came the decision by the US to maintain 400 troops in Syria to work alongside British and French ground forces.

Comment: Concerning Idlib, it seems Putin is sending a strong message to the GoT that if it doesn't find a solution to HTS control, then military action is likely. When the Demilitarization Zone was created around the Idlib enclave in Sep 2018, Turkey was expected to disband HTS which they have evidently failed to do. Concerning the northeast, 400 US troops are obviously thought by the US Pentagon to be enough to keep the Turks and Shia PMUs out, whilst allowing President Trump to save some face following his surprise announcement to pull all US troops out. Trumps hope to create a Safe Zone on the border with Turkey seems to have failed, reportedly due to opposing positions regarding Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – Turkey considers the YPG terrorists, whilst the US regard them as their lead partner in the fight against IS.

1. CURRENT AND DEVELOPING SITUATION (Map source <http://syriancivilwarmap.com>)



ATTACKS IN AFRIN Since the Turkish military and its allied armed groups from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) took control of the Kurdish-dominated Afrin in March 2017, they have increasingly had to face insurgency attacks. There are 3 main Kurdish insurgency groups – the YPG, Ghadab al-Zaitoun (Wrath of Olives) and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine (Afrin Liberation Forces). Together they have claimed responsibility for almost 220 attacks carried out between late Mar 2018 and the end of Jan 2019, although there is little independent reporting from Afrin to confirm this. The attacks include IEDs, anti-tank missiles, shootings, and the kidnap and murder of FSA fighters and alleged civilian informers. Since the Turkish offensive 10 Turkish soldiers have died and Bellingcat, an online investigative media outlet, estimate that at least 100 FSA fighters have been killed.

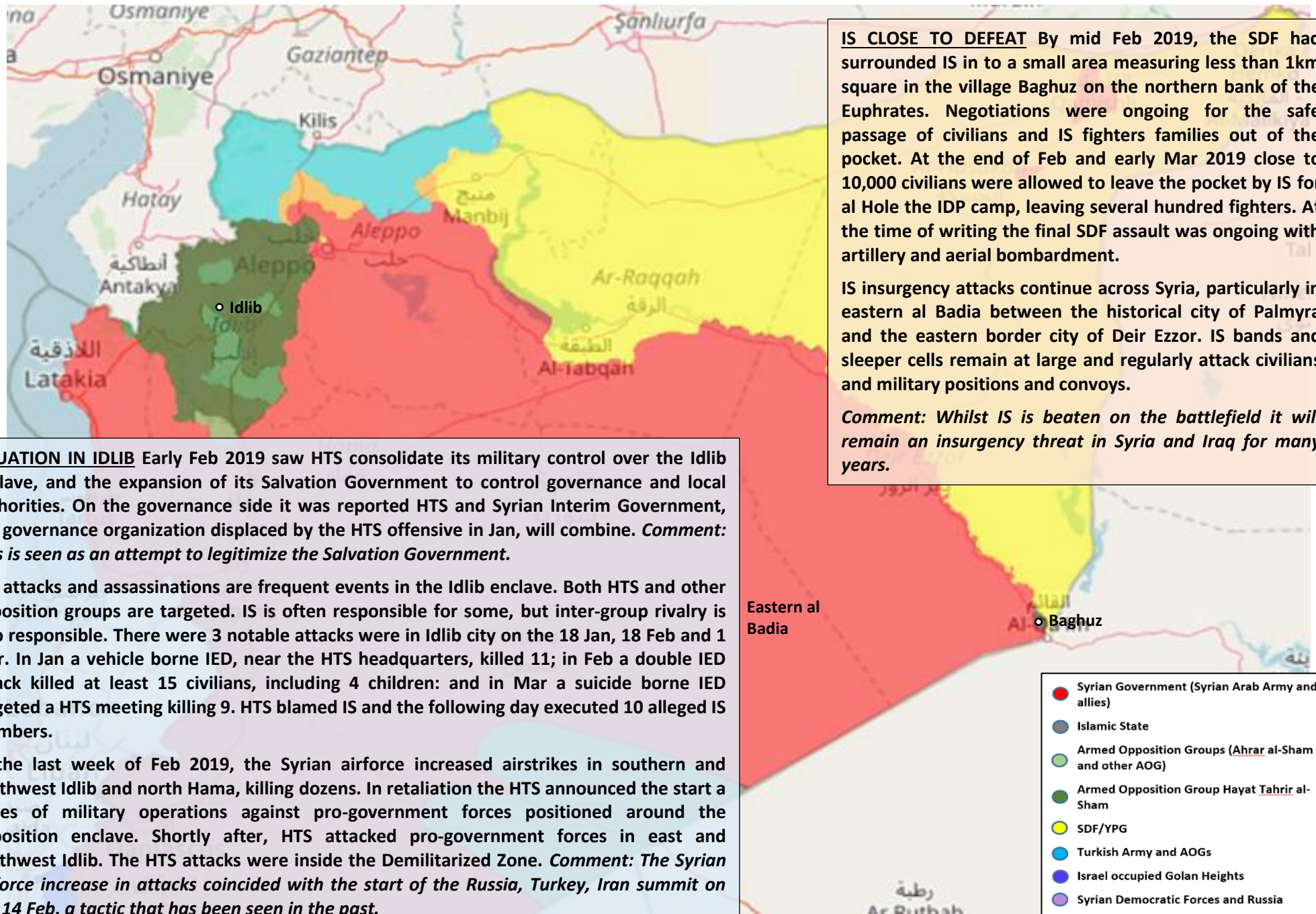
In turn, the FSA fighters have been accused by the United Nations and Human Rights Watch of human rights abuses including rape, theft, extortion, kidnappings and the forced displacement of locals in favour of Syrian Arabs.

Comment: The GoR allows the Turkish occupation of Afrin and north Aleppo, despite the Syrian government's objections, in the hope to isolate Turkey further from the west and NATO. However, it seems this appeasement does not extend to further Turkish military incursions into northeast Syria.

MASS GRAVES In Jan 2019, in al Raqqa city a mass grave of an estimated 1000 bodies was discovered by a local NGO. The local authority states there are 14 mass graves in the area, although most of these are reported to be much smaller than this recently discovered grave. *Comment: It's reasonable to assume that IS are responsible for these mass killings.*

INSURGENCY ATTACKS IN SDF CONTROLLED AREAS Across the northeast of Syria, the SDF face insurgency style attacks several times a week, although those responsible for the attacks are not always believed to be IS. Around Al-Thawrah City and in al Raqqa Governorate many attacks targeting the SDF are attributed to GoS backed local armed groups opposed to Kurdish Self-Administration. Most attacks further east and south of al Hasakeh are attributed to IS, who target both the SDF and civilians. Attacks are mostly IEDs and shootings.

- 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



2. Humanitarian Situation

KEY FIGURES

Whilst there has been a reduction in violence in many parts of Syria over the past year, the impact of present and past hostilities on civilians remains the principal driver of humanitarian needs in Syria.

- Number of IDPs: 6.2 M
- Number of Returnees: 1.4 M (Jan-Dec 2018)
- Number of Palestinian Refugees: 438,000
- Number of People in Need in NW Syria: 2.7 M (incl. 1.7M IDP)
- Number of Children in Need: 5.8 M
- **Total People in Need: 13.1 M**

KEY CONCERNS & HIGHLIGHTS

- Key concerns in 2019 include conditions for people living in overcrowded IDP sites, the needs of host communities who share resources with IDPs, safety of returnees, and the impact of floods and drought from 2018 on food security and livelihoods.
- The impact of funding-related cuts to vulnerable Palestine refugees will threaten the lives and livelihoods of this disadvantaged population.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

- A recent expansion of HTS in northwest Syria has resulted in a more challenging working environment for humanitarians on the ground. South Idlib and North Hama governorates have in the past weeks seen a significant escalation of conflict. This has severely restricted movements and accessing essential services such as schools, hospitals, and markets. See [REACH NA Report](#)
- Turkey's southeastern border gate with Syria in the province of Kilis "Öncüpinar" was reopened for commercial trucks.
- UN delivered their largest humanitarian convoy to Rukban camp near the Jordanian border. There are over 41,000 displaced Syrians in this remote makeshift settlement.



KEY HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

- Consultations with communities have indicated that access to Livelihoods opportunities and basic services are among their primary concerns as affected people seek to rebuild their lives.
- More than one in three schools are damaged or destroyed.
- 2018 has witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of IDPs seeking shelter in last resort sites. Across Syria, it is estimated that the overall IDP site population increased by 16 per cent.
- Based on recent assessments, the Food Security and Agriculture sector estimates that a third of the population in Syria is food insecure, with pockets of acute and chronic malnutrition persisting in certain areas.
- An estimated 40% of Syrians spend more than 65% of their expenditure on food, 57% of food insecure households reported to have outstanding debt, and 65% of food insecure people are adopting negative coping strategies.
- 3% of the population spending more than 20% of their income to purchase water and in some cases as high as 40%. The situation is even more dire for people living in informal settlements, where families can spend over 50 per cent of their incomes on water.
- Different forms of violence against women have become interlinked. A girl forced into a child marriage 5 years ago may now be a widow or divorcee (sometimes more than once), with children to protect and feed, putting her and her family at greater risk of exploitation, sexual violence, temporary or forced marriage, and other forms of violence.

HAJIN DISPLACEMENT and AL HOLE CAMP

The recent SDF fight against IS has displaced 29,000 people from around Hajin to the al Hole camp in Hassakeh governorate, some 300 km north of Hajin. The new arrivals tripled the population of the al Hole camp, which is now at full capacity. Extremely harsh conditions are reported along the route north, including cold temperatures and a lack of food, water, shelter and health services. By mid-Feb, at least 50 children were reported to have died either while in transit or shortly after arriving in the al Hole camp, mostly due to hypothermia caused by exposure and a lack of access to healthcare.