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*Supporting Sustainable
Peace in Syria*

SYRIA BRIEF

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Photo Credit: Alexandro Auler

The Fortnight in Review

Turkish Troops to Stay Until Elections as Buffer Zone Established


Turkish PM Erdogan has stated that his country's troops will remain in Syria until elections are held. Turkish forces entered Syria in 2016, citing the need to clear the border area of IS fighters, but since also taking northern Kurdish-held areas including Afrin and Azaz. Turkey has twelve observation post in Idlib province, Russia has ten and Iran has six (Al Jazeera). Turkey, which backs fighters opposed to Assad, is concerned that any major offensive would see an influx of refugees into Turkey, which already hosts over 3.5 million refugees (UNHCR). Last month saw Erdogan make an agreement with Russian President Putin on a 15-20 km demilitarised zone in the north, which should be in place by October 15th and see the withdrawal of "extremist" groups". The Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) has started withdrawing heavy arms (notably missile launchers, tanks and mortars) from the buffer zone ahead of the deadline. The deal stated that security in the area will be overseen by Turkish forces and Russian military police, however the stance of Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS- dominated by al-Nusra Front before it renounced its ties to al-Qaeda), is not yet known. Their stance is crucial as they control approximately 60% of Idlib's territory.

Al-Muallem "welcomes" back refugees

At the UN General Assembly, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said his country's "battle against terrorism is almost over" and that it is now ready to welcome the millions who fled back. He claimed that the "doors are wide open for all Syrians abroad" to return home, however many Syrians are afraid due to forced military conscription and detention for those suspected of being in the opposition. According to UNHCR, around 13,000 Syrians returned from Lebanon during the first six months of this year. However many continue to flee the country - this week, Slovakian PM Peter Pellegrini agreed that Slovakia would take in several dozen orphaned Syrian children.

In his speech, Muallem also criticised international interference and accused the US of war crimes in Raqqa, whilst denying the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government. As the Assad government consolidates its rule over most of the country, Muallem said that Syria welcomes reconstruction aid but not with conditions attached, nor from those involved in "aggression". He said that reconciliation efforts are underway and that foreign troops should leave Syria, defying "occupation" and violations of sovereignty. Currently there are Turkish soldiers in the north, and American and French in the east.

Peacebuilding Corner

And  is a digital commissioning programme to support displaced Syrian artists, launched by The Space and the British Council. Hussein Haddad's series of photos, Refugee Cats, tells the stories of five different Syrian refugees through the cats they have either travelled with or been forced to leave behind. He hopes that viewers will understand the effects of displacement on the refugees through the association of the domestic cat with the home. This work is dedicated to Hussein's friend, Muthna Hamzawi, who was tortured to death in a Syrian government prison. Muthna used to take out the cheese out of his sandwiches to feed the cats in his neighborhood. He was arrested while attempting to smuggle food to civilians in the besieged areas of Damascus. Haddad says: "When people talk about Syria, they often do so in the context of the "war", or increasingly the focus is on the Islamic State Organisation. Missing from the media coverage and the propaganda is the detail of Syrians as individuals. What is missing from the statistics of four million or so refugees, is the number of cats that migrated, that were caught in the violence or that were killed. It is no luxury to talk about cats, for they are part of our daily lives. War is something that cats cannot understand. Unfortunately, this does not give cats the right to a simple and normal way of life, and they met the same fate as Syrians". <http://refugee-cats.tumblr.com/post/135434460402/dedicated-to-my-friend-muthna-hamzawi-muthna-used>

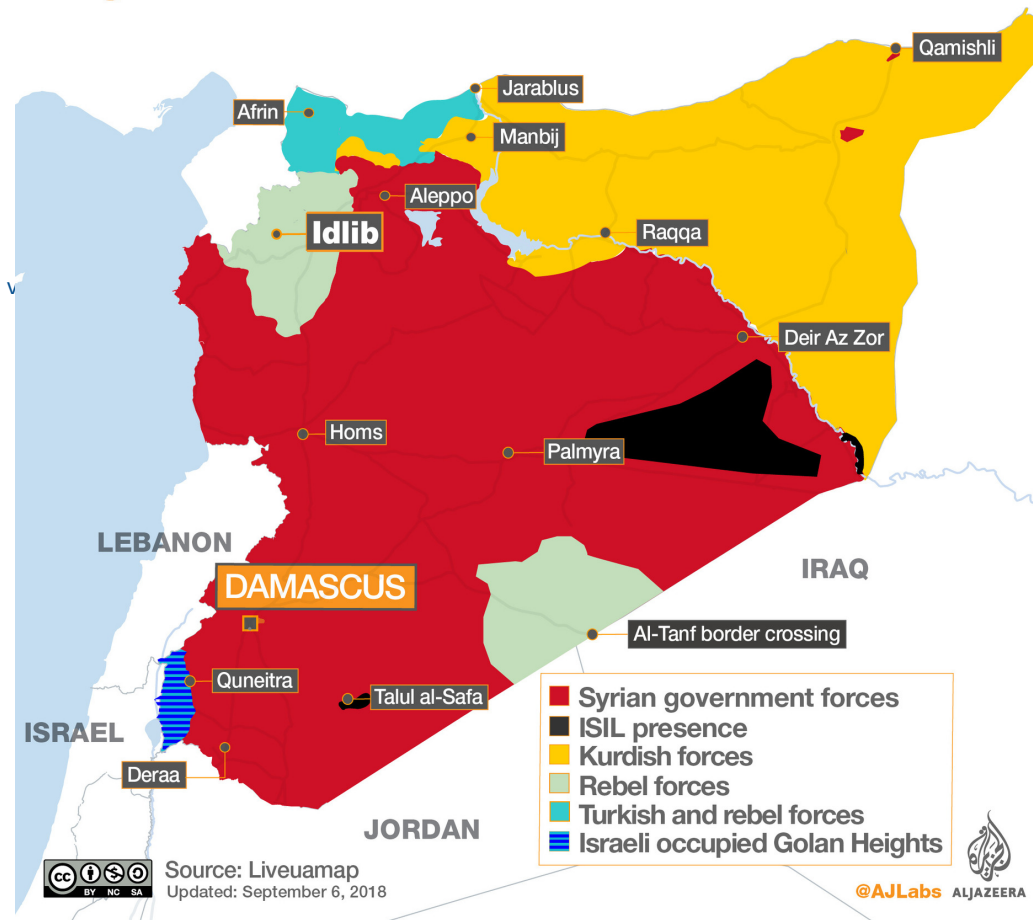
Russia provides Syria with S-300 surface-to-air missile system

On the 17th of September a Syrian air defence missile hit and downed a Russian Il-20 plane. The Russian aircraft was preparing to land after the targeted attacks by four Israeli fighter jets in north-west region of Syria. The entire crew of 15 people was killed during the crash. Russia holds Israel responsible for the incident and claims their aircraft was caught in the crossfire. Israel on the other hand puts the blame on the indiscriminate air defence fire system the Syrian government had in place. As a result of the friendly fire incident, Russia and Syria have agreed on to assemble a S-300 surface-to-air missile system that will ensure such mishaps will no longer occur. This decision has received a lot of international criticism. In a phone call, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told President Vladimir Putin that "transferring advanced weapons systems into irresponsible hands will increase the dangers in the region". John Bolton (US National Security Advisor) expressed concern: "We think introducing the S-300s to the Syrian government would be a significant escalation by the Russians and something that we hope, if these press reports are accurate, they would reconsider". Nevertheless, the Russian Defence Minister Sergi Shoigu confirmed on the 2nd of October that the missiles were delivered along with four launching platforms. While it will take about three months to train Syrian forces to use the new system, it is expected that by the 20th of October Russia and Syria will have completed the integration of their air defence assets into one single automated system.

Russian Ministry of Defence map



Syria: Who controls what?



Four-way diplomatic intervention planned for Idlib

A four-way meeting between Turkey, Germany, Russia and France on the subject of Idlib is expected to be held in October, following Erdogan's September visit to Berlin despite "deep differences". Turkey is seeking to improve relations with Germany as US-Turkey relations sour and the Lira plummets, and Germany is seeking support on migration despite 35 German nationals currently being imprisoned in Turkey for political reasons.

Golan Druze celebrate

Druze in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights have gathered at the Syrian border to celebrate what they see as Assad's victory in the Syrian conflict. The Druze, a minority community in the majority Sunni community of Syria, are traditionally loyal to the Assad family, The Golan Heights was captured by Israel in the 1967 war.

Iran retaliates for attack

Iran has launched at least 6 missiles and several drone-guided bombs into rebel-held territory in eastern Syria near the town of Al-Bukamal, following an attack on a military parade which killed 29. Both Islamic State and Ahvaz National Resistance have claimed responsibility for the deadly attack in south-western Iran. The area surrounding Al Bukamal is generally held by government forces, but is often the target of IS attacks.

Want to learn more about our work in Syria?
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