

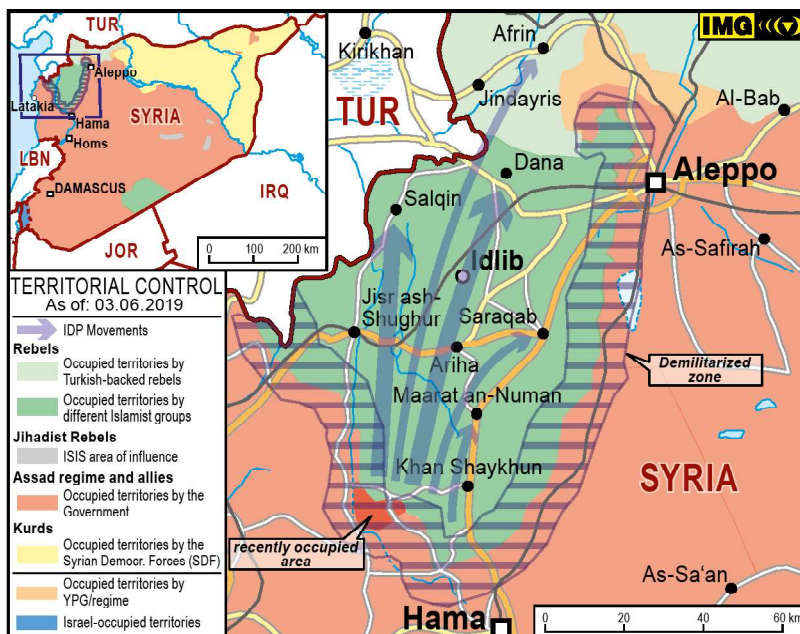


# FACT SHEET SYRIA

16 April 2019 – 03 June 2019 No. 74

Recent fighting in the Ghab Plain, as well as bombardments all over the opposition area in Idlib and Aleppo forced hundreds of thousands of Syrians to flee. Three million people live in the opposition-held area in north-western Syria, which is under control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition militias, which stand in rivalry to Damascus. Over a million of the regions inhabitants are internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the area, predominantly souther Idlib and northern Hama and other parts of Syria. The central humanitarian question is how Turkey will handle the hundreds of thousands of potential refugees, if the aerial bombardments continues. In the first three weeks of May alone, 270.000 people fled the battle zone in the south of the opposition-held area.

The recent warning shot of the Syrian Army near one of the 12 Turkish observation posts in northwestern Syria, alongside the influx of opposition militias from the partly Turkish administered areas of Afrin and the Jarabulus corridor suggests, that Turkey and Russia could not reach an agreement upon Idlib during the Astana talks. Securing the border between Turkey and the area of influence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) remains the sticking point in the negotiations between the US and Turkey. After minor Turkish attacks at the end of 2018, the US established presence along the border. There have already been proposals to permanently secure the border by Iraqi Peschmerga or Arab militias from within the SDF. However, so far no solution has been agreed upon by Turkey and the Democratic Union Party PYD, the most powerful faction in north-eastern Syria.



Note: No claim to completeness of the map is put forward.

## MAP ANALYSIS

Continued air strikes by the Syrian regime and its ally Russia within the demilitarized zone in Idlib resulted in a massive refugee flow. Since the beginning of May, the Syrian army has also been carrying out a ground offensive in the west and southwest of the region, thus contributing to the fighting. According to OCHA, nearly 300,000 people fled southern Idlib in May alone. The largest numbers of internally displaced persons were registered in the communities of Idlib, Dana and Salqin, followed by Maarat an-Numan, Saraqab and Afrin in the Syrian-Turkish border region.

## FORECAST

On May 22, the Syrian government announced that it would open the crossing between the Morek-Souran opposition area north of Hama to civilians. Turkey refuses to accept more refugees from Syria and tries to accommodate them in the area controlled by the Turkish army in northern Syria. In May, some 3000 people left the opposition area heading to Aleppo, which is controlled by the Syrian government, and to the province of Latakia. The pressure on the population is increased due to the destruction of agricultural land, hospitals and schools. The Syrian regime still strives to recapture Idlib and all other Syrian provinces it lost in the war. In eastern Syria, the Islamic State (IS) continues to challenge the Syrian army and its allied foreign Shiite militias as well as the SDF by carrying out minor attacks. There's no telling how these attacks will come to an end. Various military operations carried out by the SDF, the Syrian army and its allies in the region could not weaken IS in the border area to Iraq so far significantly. The idea of a small international observer mission at the border was also raised by the Syrian Kurds.

*The periodically published Fact Sheet compiles and analyzes significant developments pertaining to the Syrian conflict while providing maps and an outlook of possible future events.*

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**SOURCES:** MEDIA ANALYSIS; **LAYOUT:** REF III/Medien, IMG



## INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

16.04.: Iranian foreign minister Zarif held talks with Syrian president Assad in Damascus and afterwards travelled to Ankara in order to coordinate their positions on Syria ahead of the 12th round of talks in Astana. Furthermore Iran and Turkey announced to intensify financial cooperation in the face of US-sanctions on Iran.

18.04.: Iraqi and Syrian authorities revealed their plan to secure the common border in order to open the border crossing in the Euphrates Valley and secure the area against IS attacks. The Syrian Army established several checkpoints along the desert border. Iraqi authorities plan to secure the border by aerial surveillance and patrols.

20.04.: Kosovo brought back 110 citizens from Syria. The remaining 87 Kosovar citizens in Syria are also planned to be returned. In 2015 Kosovo passed a law, which allows to imprison people, who fought in conflicts abroad, for up to 15 years.

21.04.: The deputy prime minister of Russia, Yuri Borisov, announced that the agreement to lease the Tartus port to Russia for 49 years will be signed within a week. In early April it became public that Iranian and Syrian authorities had started talks about renting Syria's main commercial port Latakia.

25.04.: With the participation of UN Special Envoy Pedersen, the 12th round of the Astana talks took place. Although Russia conducted intense negotiations with several actors about the list of names of the Constitutional Committee, the talks ended with a mere agreement on speeding up the formation of the Committee. A diplomatic solution for Idlib could not be achieved either.

29.04.: IS released a video message by its head Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, where he stated that IS is entering a new phase after the loss of its territories in Syria and Iraq. It was the first public appearance of al-Baghdadi since 2014.

15.05.: In a phone call between Erdogan and Putin about reducing growing tensions in Idlib, they agreed upon establishing a joint working group. Before the recent offensive against opposition areas in Idlib and Aleppo, Russia and Turkey worked closely together, Turkey, however, seemed to fail in preventing the Syrian Army and its allies of conducting a ground offensive.

27.05.: The Turkish Gaziantep University plans to set up four faculties in northern Syria. Last year the university already opened a vocational school the year before near Jarablus.

03.06.: High-ranking officials and experts from eleven EU countries as well as UN representatives met in Sweden to discuss the topic of detained IS members. Sweden pled for an international tribunal for IS fighters of European origin. Most European countries continue to refuse responsibility for their citizens, who joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The Netherlands argue that the UNSC is a suitable forum for further discussions in this regard.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

02.05.: HTS fired several dozen missiles at the Russian military airport Hmeimim near Latakia. According to their own statements, the Russian air defence foiled 12 missile attacks in the past weeks.

06.05.: In response to aerial attack on Tal Othman, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its allies launched an offensive in rebel-controlled areas around Idlib. The ground offensive was preceded by weeks of intense attacks by the Syrian and Russian air forces.

09.05.: After occupying Kafr Nabuda the day before, SAA troops conquered the city of Qalaat al-Madiq, from which rocket attacks against the Russian military airport in Hmeimim had been carried out in previous weeks. Shortly afterwards, Kafr Nabuda was reoccupied by opposition militias for a few days. Since then, the offensive by government forces has been slow due to fierce resistance and the strengthening of opposition force by militias from Turkey-controlled areas in northern Syria.

15.5.: After a shootout between former rebels and government forces in southern Syria, the Syrian army besieged the town of Sanamayn for a second time in a one month.

17.05.: Israeli fighter planes bombed a Syrian brigade headquarter in the Kuneitra region. In the past, Israel has carried out attacks against Iranian troops allied with Syria. Recent air strikes come at a time of increased tension between Iran and the US.

18.05.: Shortly after the first SDF recruitment centre was opened in Deir ez-Zor province, the SDF arrested 20 men in Raqqa and other areas east of the Euphrates for evading military service. The SDF denies the arrests, however they called on all men between the age of 18 and 28 to attend the "duty on self-defense".

20.05.: IS members attacked government forces in eastern Syria, near Sukhna, and killed 20 soldiers. In the last two months there have been more attacks of IS in eastern Syria, according to opposition media almost 100 Syrian soldiers as well as 36 IS members died.

02.06.: In response to rocket fire on the Israeli occupied Golan heights, the Israeli military hit several targets in Quneitra province and at the outskirts of Damascus, killing three Syrian and seven foreign nationals, according to opposition sources. The week before Israel also fired missiles on targets in southern Syria.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

22.04.: Hundreds of displaced Syrians from refugee camps in Jordan and the IDP camp in Rukhban near the Jordanian border returned to their homes during the last few weeks. Some International Organisations and the Syrian government argue that the US, which controls the area, is responsible for the poor humanitarian conditions in the camp.

22.04.: As part of the implementation of the Astana process a third exchange of government and opposition prisoners was carried out near al-Bab.

05.05.: In order to ease the fuel crisis in Syria, Iran made its first oil delivery to the country in 2019. A few days before the US treasury renewed its guidelines warning of sanctioning companies involved in trading petroleum with Syria. Damascus accused the US of waging an economic war.

06.05.: According to OCHA intensifying bombings of the demilitarized areas, carried out by the government and Russian forces resulted in the internal displacement of more than 100.000 civilians in Northern Syria between April 29 and May 6. The bombings were a response to the 12th round of the Astana talks, during which Russia, Turkey and Iran failed to agree on a diplomatic solution for the opposition held area in and around Idlib.

06.05.: 3,800 IDPs returned to their cities and villages in Deir ez-Zor countryside. The return was also made possible due to a legislative decree issued in 2018, granting a general amnesty for military deserters inside and outside Syria.

08.05.: Arab residents of Deir ez-Zor province commenced a third week of protests against Kurdish rule, complaining of a lack of basic services and discrimination in the local administration demanding that the SDF forces leave the area. An SDF raid targeting an IS sleeper cell in al-Shuhayl the following week inflamed existing tensions in eastern Deir ez-Zor and resulted in further anti-SDF protests due to the harsh methods of the SDF.

15.05.: Following an Israeli attempts to tighten administrative control over the Golan Heights by forcing the inhabitants to register their lands at Israeli authorities, the Syrian government reached out to the United Nations.



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