



**Atlas
Assistance**

Syria Monthly Report

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Key takeaways

Political developments

- 📍 The October 7th US announcement of withdrawal from Syria's north-eastern border region removed the main obstacle to a rapprochement between the SDF and the Syrian and Russian governments.
- 📍 The subsequent Turkish invasion – the third so far in Syria - has also alarmed both the EU and the leading arab states and opened them even more to the idea of a détente with Damascus and Moscow.

Economic developments

- 📍 On the 13th the newly-founded Lira Intervention Fund began pumping dollars deposited by businessmen into local currency markets to reduce the gap between official and black-market dollar rates.
- 📍 However, even though both the Lira Intervention Fund and local media say the intervention is succeeding, open source data and Atlas Assistance sources say black-market rates are unchanged.

Humanitarian developments

- 📍 The Turkish invasion into north-eastern Syria displaced 300,000 people, left 120 civilians dead and included a broad selection of atrocities, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.
- 📍 Moreover, the UN claims the Turkish military campaign has wrought extensive damage to electrical, medical and water facilities along the north-eastern border, deepening a local humanitarian crisis.

Security developments

- 📍 On October 22nd President Putin and Erdogan held another bilateral summit in Sochi and concluded an agreement for a security order in north-eastern Syria mixing the 1998 Adana Accord with Ankara's long-standing demand for an exclusive safe zone it can deport Syrian refugees from Turkey to.

Local developments

- 📍 Damascus governorate witnessed no insurgent attacks or Israeli airstrikes in October.
- 📍 The insurgency in Deraa continues unabated and came to a head in the northern town of Sanamain where several clashes broke out between government security forces and opposition insurgent cells.
- 📍 The Syrian army began its long-awaited offensive in north-eastern Latakia but gained limited ground.
- 📍 The expected pro-government offensive in north-western Hama and south-western Idlib was postponed due to the sudden US pull-out from north-eastern Syria and the subsequent Turkish invasion.
- 📍 On October 27th a US raid in the north-western sector of Idlib killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was apparently liaising with other jihadists while hiding near the Turkish border.
- 📍 As the Turkish army and its allied rebels also prepared to invade both Manbej and Kobani in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, the SDF quickly ceded both towns to the Syria army for protection.
- 📍 After bombing the entire length of the border with Raqqqa and Hassakeh, the Turkish army and its rebel allies launched two intensive ground offensives at Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, eventually seizing both cities and the area between them.
- 📍 In Deir al-Zour SDF redeployed practically all non-local fighters to the frontlines along the northern border, enabling the IS insurgency to continue unabated against local SDF members. The US deployed additional forces to the oil fields in eastern Deir al-Zour, officially to prevent them from falling to IS.

Future developments

- 📍 The Syrian Constitutional Committee is unlikely to make much headway in November due to the ongoing fighting in north-eastern Syria and the increasingly mercurial role of the US in this part of Syria.
- 📍 Clashes will likely continue north of Tal Tamr in Hassakeh with a risk of spreading elsewhere along the border, while the Syrian army is expected to finally launch the Ghab Plain offensive in Hama.



Political developments

US abandons the SDF to Damascus, Moscow and Ankara

On October 7th the US announced it would withdraw from Syria's north-eastern border region and do nothing to stop an imminent, though long-looming, Turkish military campaign against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The exact circumstances behind President Trump's sudden decision to withdraw US forces from the border-region and allow their local partners in the fight against Islamic State to be mauled by the Turkish army remain as unclear as for many of the president's other decisions. Although it was sudden and unexpected, Trump in April and December 2018 twice declared intent to withdraw from Syria. In fact, only counter-lobbying from his advisors and other US politicians convinced him otherwise. Thus, it was not the content of the decision that was unexpected, but rather its timing and the manner of its execution, especially with regards to the kurds. The US manoeuvre is already changing the trajectory of the conflict in Syria in ways whose full extent remains to be seen. But simply put, the US withdrawal – although far from complete - will improve the ability of the Astana track sponsors Russia, Turkey and Iran to wind down the conflict largely as they see fit. This will first and foremost benefit the Syrian government, much less the opposition, and with little advantage for the kurdish groups.

Politically, the unfolding US withdrawal from the border region has eroded whatever remained of US credibility and trustworthiness among its local, regional and international allies. The SDF has made no attempt to conceal its sense of betrayal and has concluded a tactical military cooperation deal with the Syrian army to fend off the Turkish threat as a prelude to a resumption of strategic political talks, with Damascus now enjoying unprecedented leverage. The SDF has also reached out to Russia as a guarantor for its security interest, just as Turkey did over the course of 2015-2016 due to similar frustration with broken American promises. The SDF has achieved some military protection from Damascus and Moscow despite not having agreed to all their terms for a withdrawal from the border and unification with the SAA. However, barring unforeseen circumstances, it is only a matter of time before Russian-permitted Turkish pressure will make the SDF cave into the demands of Damascus and Moscow. Then SDF will pay at the negotiating table where kurdish leverage has evaporated along with US protection. The kurds will not be included as an independent player in the Astana/Sochi track, a particularly important political victory for Turkey. Ankara, Moscow and Tehran can then push the diplomatic process forward on their terms with little concern for SDF/US spoiling, which will show in an essentially bilateral government/opposition dynamic within the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which took off on October 30th.

The US decision to leave the north-eastern border and the SDF finding itself at the receiving end of Turkey's assault and at the mercy of Moscow and Damascus is also having international ramifications. The Turkish invasion expectedly drew sharp rebuke from the leading arab states Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. Like the SDF, the arab states will similarly look to mend/strengthen ties with Damascus and Moscow to counter what they see as neo-Ottoman expansionism in arab lands abetted by an erratic US administration. This process began after Trump's withdrawal announcements in 2018 but was halted when the US in early 2019 expressed long-term commitment in Syria. The partial US withdrawal and the Turkish invasion has also frustrated America's coalition and NATO allies in Europe. They appear to have received no prior notification about the US decision to pull the rug from under the extensive multilateral military campaign in Syria. French and British forces were also forced to withdraw from the border, while Paris as well as Berlin have intensified contacts with Moscow in a desperate bid to preserve some say in the course of events. They will likely make a similar outreach to Damascus sooner rather than later. Equally importantly, the assault on the kurds has exhausted European patience with Ankara and led to arms sales bans and other punitive measures by EU states against Turkey. Even the US Congress has recognised the Armenian genocide to show its displeasure with the Turkish invasion.



Economic developments

Lira Intervention Fund begins operating

The Syrian currency market has witnessed increasing state intervention after the newly-founded Lira Intervention Fund began pumping USD into the local currency exchange markets. The fund was set up by the Damascus Chamber of Commerce in coordination with the Syrian Central Bank in late September. It aims to strengthen the Syrian currency vis-à-vis the US dollar and narrow the wide gap between the official and black-market currency exchange rates. The black-market rate (650 pounds = 1 dollar) had climbed to nearly 150% of the official rate (438 pounds = 1 dollar) over the summer. The fund invites businessmen holding large amounts of dollars to deposit them in the fund at a fixed rate of 600 pounds = 1 dollar. The depositors will be repaid in Syrian currency at that rate in the future. The fund will then inject the deposited dollars into the money market at a rate higher than the official rate but lower than the black-market rate to increase the supply, lower the black-market dollar price and increase the value of the Syrian pound. As the black-market price of dollars gradually falls towards the levels offered by the Lira Intervention Fund, the fund will gradually lower its rate accordingly to keep driving down the general market price of dollars and appreciate the Syrian currency accordingly. Moreover, the Lira Investment Fund makes daily statements about the black-market rate to demonstrate the market forces of supply and demand at work in narrowing the currency exchange gap between official and unofficial rates, as well as to contain the rampant currency speculation ongoing in Syria.

Herein lies the incentive for the businessmen depositing dollars with the fund. The fund's intervention is *intended* to bring down the black-market price of dollars from the 650 pounds recorded in early October to around 500, but the depositors are guaranteed to be compensated 600 pounds for every dollar deposited. In short, they forego *illegal* short-term currency exchange profits in the black market for future margins once they get repaid *legally* in Syrian pounds at a rate higher than the future market value of the national currency, which they can then convert back to dollars at a rate lower than the current rate if they so wish. Illustrating the power of this incentive structure, four weeks after its establishment around 1 billion USD had been deposited in the fund. Much of this money is believed to have been transferred from Syrian businessmen's accounts in Lebanon, where a growing monetary crisis has created a nascent currency black-market and sowed serious doubts about the stability of the Lebanese pounds vis-à-vis the dollar.

On October 13th the Lira Intervention Fund began injecting the deposited dollars into local money markets. In the first phase of its intervention, the fund offered US currency at a rate of 625 Syrian pounds per dollar, around 5% cheaper than the black-market rate. According to statements of the fund and Syrian pro-government media outlets like al-Watan, the black-market rate quickly dropped to the same rate as that offered by the fund as a result of the surge in USD dollar supply. Consequently, on October 19th the Lira Intervention Fund lowered its own rate to 603 pounds per dollar. As the fund and the media claimed that the black-market rate dropped even further to around 610-620 pounds per dollar, the day the fund lowered its rate even further to 600 pounds per dollar. However, the purported drop in black-market rates are not undisputed. Atlas Assistance sources in Damascus and publicly available black-market exchange rate data confirm that the black-market rate of the dollar has not dropped as claimed by the authorities and various media. Rather, it remains stable around 650 pounds per dollar. This appears to be the reason for the persistent rumours that the dollars distributed by the Lira Intervention Fund and the Central Bank to currency exchange companies to sell at the 603 pounds per dollar rate are not actually being sold to importers and merchants as intended by the authorities. The currency traders are accused of withholding the dollars and alluding to false USD shortage while actually selling them in the black-market rate instead, pocketing 50 pounds per dollar sold.



Humanitarian developments

Turkish invasion deepens local humanitarian crisis

Needless to say, the Turkish-led military operation in north-eastern Syria immediately made a very bad humanitarian situation much worse. According to the UN, more than 100,000 people were displaced in just the first five days after the Turkish bombardment began on October 7th. By October 14th, the number had swollen to 250,000 and further to 300,000 when the US-brokered 120-hour ceasefire went into effect on the 17th, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Conservative UN estimates were however much lower, in the range of 200,000. Practically the entire civilian populations of border towns like Ras al-Ain and Darbasiyah were forced to flee their homes. Among those displaced were also thousands of people who were already IDPs originating from other parts of Syria. For example, the kurdish authorities evacuated 7,000 displaced persons from the Mabrouka IDP camp in Hassakeh when it came under Turkish artillery fire. Thousands more were displaced for similar reasons from the Ain Issa camp in northern Raqqa, which hosted 13,000 displaced people from other parts of Syria prior to the Turkish offensive. According to UNOCHA, more than 10,000 IDPs have been forced to fled to Iraq.

In addition to massive displacement, Turkish military operations have damaged or destroyed one water station which had served 400,000 civilians, as well as four medical facilities serving hundreds of thousands more. Electricity infrastructure has also been damaged and food insecurity has increased, according to the UN. Thus the 1.8 million people of the 3 million-strong population in north-eastern Syria that were in need of humanitarian assistance even before the Turkish invasion is now assessed to have grown by hundreds of thousands more. On October 27th the Syrian Humanitarian Fund launched a reserve allocation of 15 million USD to support organisations responding to the crisis.

The Turkish invasion has also involved several gross human rights violations comparable to the worst crimes witnessed during the Syrian conflict. Around October 20th-22nd, the onetime-western-backed Failaq al-Majd shared videos showing its fighters torturing, executing and mutilating the bodies of kurdish prisoners, including female YPJ fighters and ordinary civilians. The Turkish-backed rebels are also accused of being behind the ambush on and summary execution of kurdish female politician Havrin Khalaf from the Future Syria Party, an ally of the SDF and its associated political organisations, as well as forcefully preventing IDPs from Ras al-Ain from returning to their homes in accordance with the October 22nd Putin-Erdogan agreement. The Turkish-led rebels are furthermore accused by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights of engaging in rampant looting of property in both Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain districts.

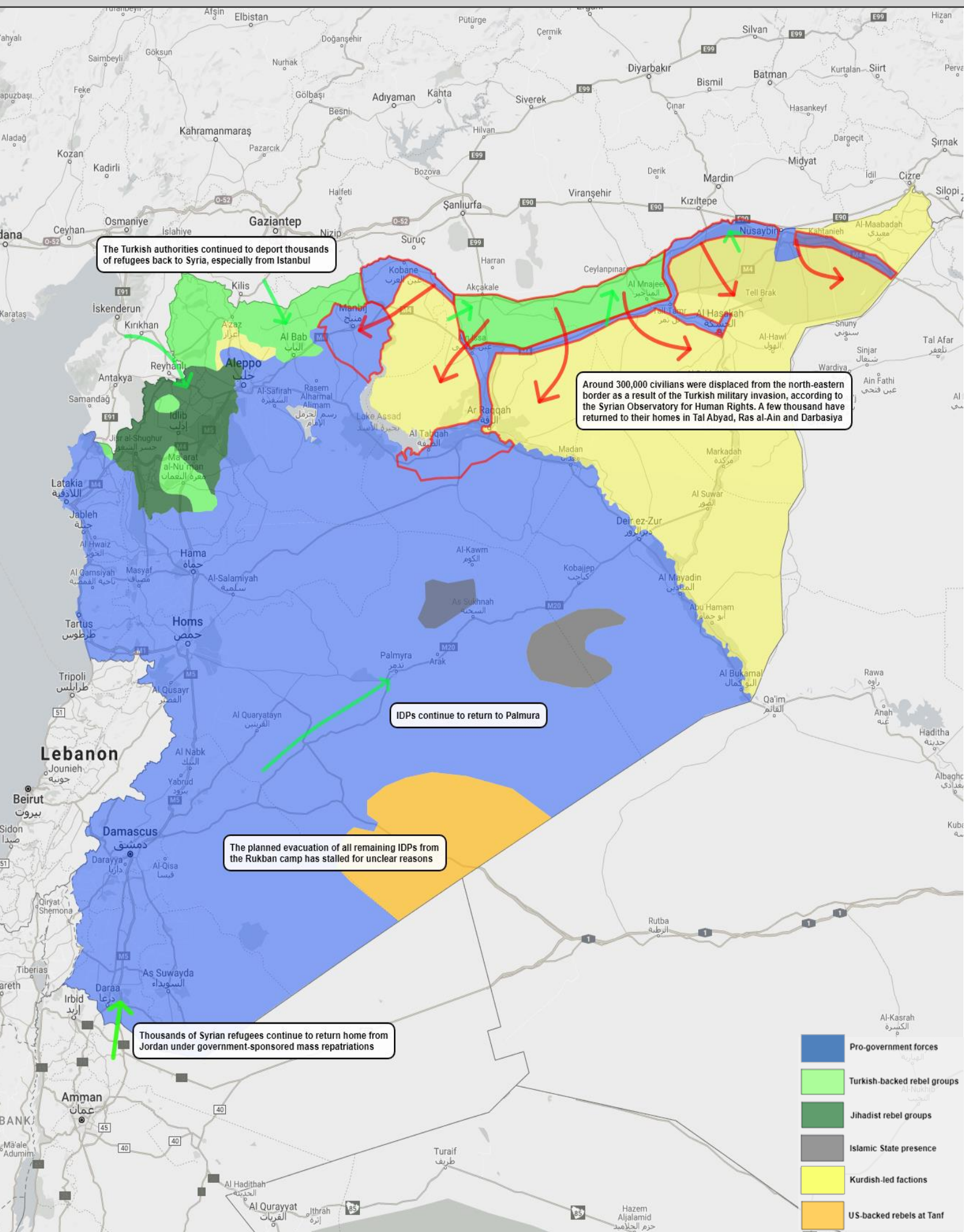


Havrin Khalaf's vehicle after her killing

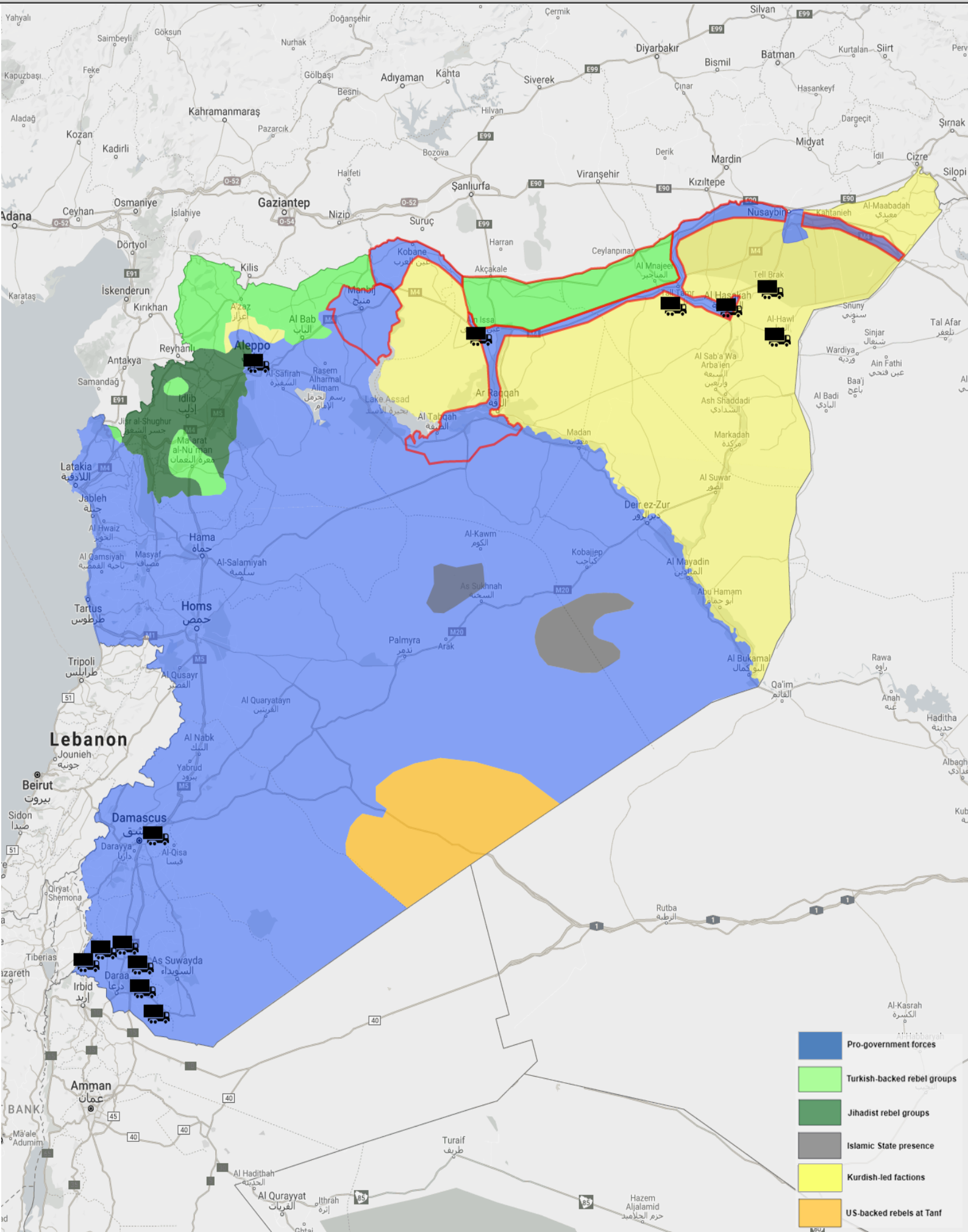
Finally, the Turkish government sticks to its plan of using the "safe zone" it seeks to establish in the 120 km long and 30 km wide strip of land between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain as a destination for hundreds of thousands or even millions of Syrian refugees meant to be deported from Turkey. One Turkish official claimed that 30,000 refugees had already returned to the safe zone, but it is unclear where they came from and if he was referring to IDPs from the area or other parts of Syria. In any case, Turkey's refugee deportations to the safe zone are expected to commence or accelerate in November. However, the nascent insurgency against Turkish soldiers and their rebel allies in this zone indicate that the Syrians forcefully repatriated from Turkey to their new homes will not find the safe zone safe at all.



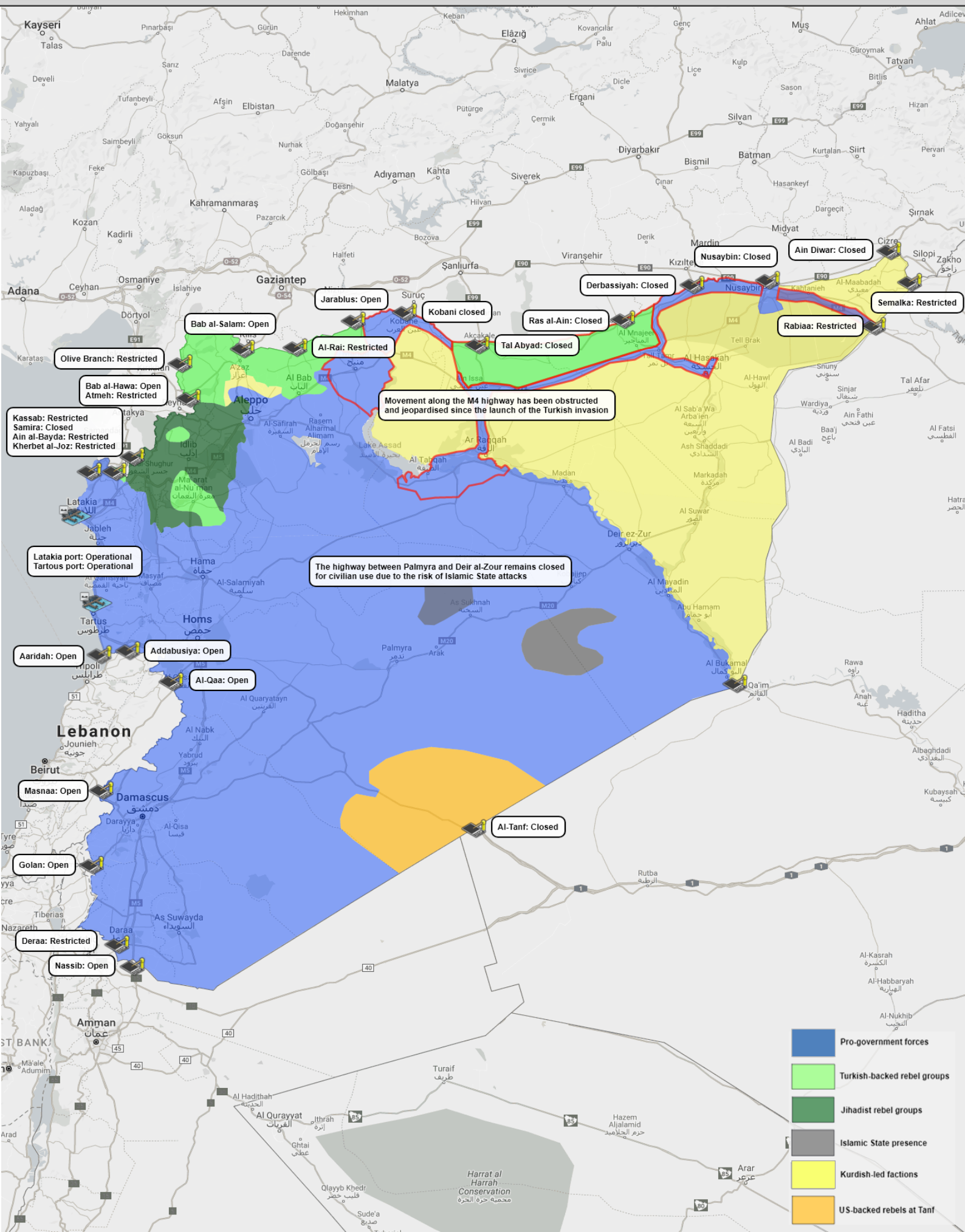
Map of IDP and refugee flows



Map of aid deliveries



Map of access routes



Security developments

Turkish intervention paves way for Adana Accord

On October 7th the Turkish military began bombarding SDF positions across the north-eastern border after the US announced it would withdraw from the region and not stand in the way of a Turkish invasion. The ground offensive began two days later when Turkish troops and thousands of allied rebel fighters exfiltrated from Idlib and Aleppo crossed the borders with Raqqqa and Hassakeh governorates (see more below). The Turkish invasion officially aims at eradicating the SDF/YPG “terrorist threat” and establishing Ankara’s long-sought safe zone along the border. However, the kurds in the region as well as broad sections of the international community feared, not without reason, that a campaign of ethnic cleansing was about to start. That is one among many reasons the invasion has been universally condemned by rights groups and the international community. Ironically, most of the 28 rebel groups taking part in the Turkish offensive under the Syrian National Army label were supported for years by the West and the Gulf Monarchies during their fight against the Syrian government as alleged ‘moderate rebels’ and ‘acceptable armed opposition’. 21 of them once received Pentagon and CIA funding, but are now being derided as ‘thugs’ by western officials and ‘arab militias’ by the media rather than just rebels.

Aside from the broader political implications of the Turkish offensive (see more above), its main result has been a big, first step towards the (re-)implementation of the 1998 Adana Accord as a rough border security framework, largely as we predicted in our February report. President Erdogan has consistently stated intent to establish a 30-35 km wide safe zone along the entire border in SDF-held territory. However, the conduct of the Turkish invasion clearly shows more limited objectives. It consisted of two major ground offensives against two crucial cities on the border: Tal Abyad in northern Raqqqa and Ras al-Ain in northern Hassakeh. The Turkish army and its rebel allies quickly captured dozens of towns and villages around the two border cities along with swathes of territory. However, the absence of committed offensives elsewhere suggests that Turkey only aimed to conquer the 120 km wide area from Tal Abyad to Ras al-Ain and not the entire border region. This unexpected Turkish restraint was even more remarkable given that as many as 1,000 US troops and other coalition personnel had vacated positions all along the border, granting Erdogan an opportunity to also grab land elsewhere if he had wanted to.

Abandoned by the US in face of the Turkish invasion, the SDF instantly reached out to the Syrian government for support. They quickly reached an agreement for the peaceful take-over of swathes of SDF-held territory by the Syrian army, mainly along the M4 highway between Aleppo and Hassakeh (see more below) as well as in Kobani and Qamishli. The Syrian army deployment thus served to box in the Turkish-led force between Tal Abyad in the west and Ras al-Ain district in the east while also preventing it from advancing further than 30 km inland. Finally realising the self-evident fact that the Turkish onslaught was forcing the SDF to surrender territory to the Syrian government, the US administration dispatched Vice President Mike Pence to Ankara on October 17th. Following a meeting with President Erdogan, Pence announced a 120-hour ceasefire meant to give the SDF time to freely cede the territory it had vowed to defend but which Washington had apparently promised Ankara. As part of the Erdogan-Pence agreement the SDF evacuated the encircled Ras al-Ain and ceded it to the Turkish military.

However, Erdogan insisted on a full SDF withdrawal from the entire border within the US-announced deadline, or else the campaign would resume and expand. Fearing the US would be unable to keep Turkey reigned in, the SDF intensified its outreach to Russia. On October 22nd just hours before the American 120-hour deadline, Presidents Putin and Erdogan met in Sochi for another summit to find a lasting solution to the situation at the north-eastern border. The outcome was largely an amended version of the 1998 Adana Accord incorporating the Turkish demand for a safe zone.



They agreed to establishing a 120 km-wide and 30 km-deep Turkish-controlled “safe zone” in practically the same area from Tal Abyad to Ras al-Ain that the Turkish army and its rebel allies captured over the previous two weeks. The rest of the border will see the establishment of a 10 km-wide zone to be jointly patrolled by a mix of Russian, Turkish and Syrian government troops. Turkey is establishing 12 observation posts along the border, Russian forces have launched patrols along the rest of the border, most of which was peacefully taken over from the SDF by the Syrian army. Finally, under the agreement, the SDF was given a 150-hour timeframe to withdraw all its forces 30 km from the entire length of the border and facilitate the restoration of Syrian government authority in areas still under its control.

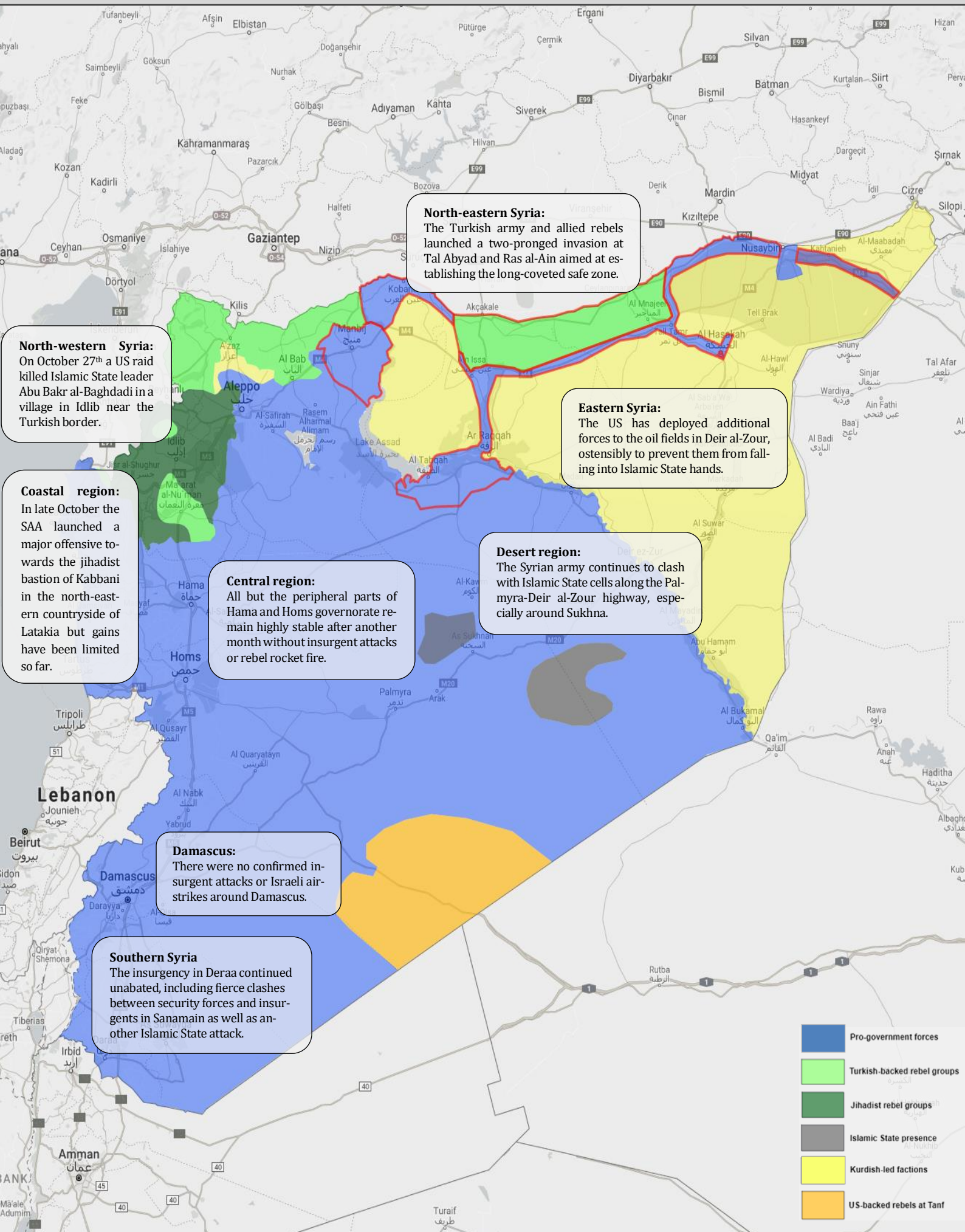
With the October 22nd agreement, Putin struck a fine compromise meeting Turkey’s minimum demands for a safe zone for exporting refugees, and Syria’s maximum tolerance for another Russia-abetted Turkish land grab assisted by rebel fighters. Admittedly, Damascus had little say in the matter. But in an October 31st interview President Assad signalled overall satisfaction with the deal which consolidate the Syrian army’s control over the areas it had taken over from the SDF during the previous week and stipulated a wider restoration of government authority in north-eastern Syria. The SDF, on the other hand, was much more ambivalent. It did voice reservation about 13 points in the deal, specifically the provision that its forces must withdraw 30 km from the entire border, not just the 120 km section constituting the Turkish safe zone. The SDF intransigence was apparently encouraged by the US. The details remain unclear but there are many reports of US troops that had withdrawn from the border region to Iraq returning to north-eastern Syria in a desperate 11th-hour attempt to support the SDF, supposedly including imposing an unannounced no-fly zone over the border region. Regardless of the US role, when the 150-hour deadline given by Putin and Erdogan expired, SDF fighters were still engaged in clashes with Turkish troops and rebel factions east of Ras al-Ain less than 30 km from the border.

Faced with SDF intransigence, the Turkish-led forces continued to attack the SDF and SAA east of Ras al-Ain while Erdogan threatened to launch other invasions elsewhere along the border. At the same time, the Syrian army withdrew from positions at Tal Tamr as well as within the 10 km corridor further east along the border. Much of the rest of the border was exposed to renewed Turkish invasion. Some analyst deemed this a collapse of the Putin-Erdogan agreement but this seems unlikely. Russia had reportedly greenlighted the continuation of Turkish attacks against the SDF east of Ras al-Ain and ordered the Syrian army to withdraw from the site of the clashes and other parts of the border in order to expose the SDF. In this light, it was in all likelihood a coordinated move by Ankara, Moscow and Damascus aimed at pressuring the SDF to withdraw 30 km from the entire border as stipulated in the October 22nd agreement. Further showing that the Putin-Erdogan agreement stands, Moscow had the Turkish-backed rebels release 18 Syrian soldiers captured east of Ras al-Ain and hand over 11 villages south of Tal Abyad to the Syrian army. In other words, Turkey and Russia remain committed to the October 22nd agreement and on keeping up pressure on the SDF until it also submits and withdraws 30 km from the border.

In sum, the situation in the north-east is close to a defined and agreed-upon political and military *modus vivendi*. The limited geographical scope of the Turkish invasion and the fact that it took just two weeks from its start before the SDF-SAA rapprochement began and the Putin-Erdogan agreement was sealed suggest that events unfolded according to a pre-planned blueprint. It is not farfetched to assume that Russia, Turkey and Iran had agreed to let the Turkish invasion and other events unfold in the way they did weeks or months ago. All they had to wait for was Erdogan’s pressure on an impatient and erratic Trump to trigger the US withdrawal he has publicly desired for 18 months. Regardless of when and how events were pre-planned, the Astana trio and the Syrian government are reaching the shared goals of a US withdrawal (though still incomplete) and the collapse of the kurdish political project, two prerequisites to move the diplomatic track forward on their terms. The exclusive Turkish safe zone was a necessary concession that Moscow, Teheran and likely also Damascus were willing to give Ankara. Now they only have to wait for the pressure on the SDF to make it fully agree to the October 22nd deal too.



Map of security developments



Damascus and southern Syria

Damascus and surroundings

Going into November the security situation in and around Damascus is unchanged and stable. For the second consecutive month, there were no reported insurgent attacks. But government security forces continue to arrest dozens of suspects around Damascus, including 50 in Harasta and another 30 in Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem in the last week of October. This corroborates assumptions of a residual presence of opposition sympathisers in formerly rebel-held areas but such arrest – especially those targeting individuals who carried out reconciliation agreements – also carry the very real risk of fuelling the anger that insurgent groups can capitalise on. October was also the second consecutive month without any reported Israeli aerial bombardment around Damascus. There were not even any reported cases of Russian air force interceptions of attempted Israeli strikes. This supports our assessment from last month's report that there has been a qualitative shift in Moscow's policy on Israeli airstrikes in Syria marked by lower tolerance for such adventurism. The very low current risk of insurgent attacks and Israeli airstrikes around Damascus is expected to continue in November and likely also beyond.

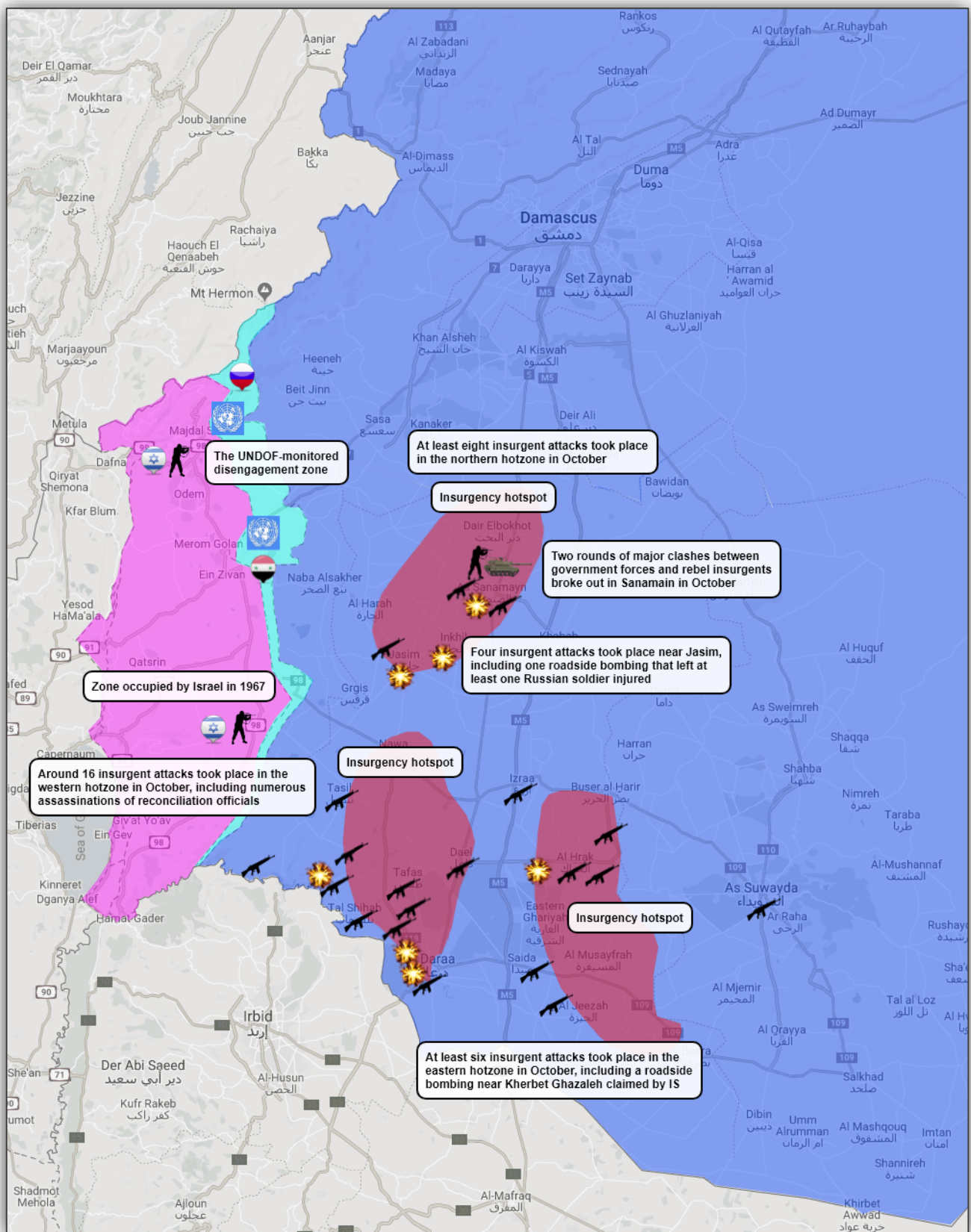
Southern Syria

The insurgency in Deraa however continues unabated. Insurgent attacks are occurring on an average of one per day and remain heavily concentrated in the three familiar hotspot zones in the north (15%), east (25%) and west (60%). In the northern sector, a string of notable incidents occurred in Jasim. On October 11th an insurgent roadside bombing targeted a joint Syrian-Russian convoy, leaving two Syrians and one Russian soldier injured in the merely second attack targeting Russian forces in Deraa this year. Two days later, two Syrian soldiers were reportedly injured when an insurgent detonated a suicide vest to avoid capture, while on the 16th insurgents assassinated the brother of former Syrian prime minister Wael al-Halqi. In nearby Sanamain, the situation escalated to levels unseen in months. On October 14th insurgents assassinated a government informer inside the city while another group ambushed a police station with assault rifles and RPGs, prompting heavy clashes that left several killed. Just eight days later, another round of clashes broke out on the city's outskirts between army soldiers and insurgent cells. The intensified insurgent operations have fuelled new speculations that the Syrian army will launch yet a major counter-insurgency operation in Sanamain in the near future.

In the eastern insurgent hotspot zone, Islamic State for the third consecutive month carried out an attack when it targeted a roadside bomb against a Syrian army convoy near Kherbet Ghazaleh on October 23rd. This confirms our assessment from last month's report that the jihadist group has established a permanent, though small, presence in Deraa capable of carrying out regular but still minor operations. It remains to be seen if this trend will continue and possibly expand following the scattering of IS members in/from north-eastern Syria after the Turkish military invasion and the escape/release of many IS members from prison. The western hotspot zone between the western suburbs of Deraa and Nawa town to the north-west remains the epicentre of insurgent activity in the governorate. Armed opposition cells in this area, more than anywhere else, prioritise targeting individuals involved in the reconciliation agreements concluded between the rebels and the government in mid-2018. On October 5th alone, three reconciliation deal officials were assassinated by insurgents in three separate hits in Yadouda, Nahta and Taibeh. In addition, at least five reconciled ex-rebels were assassinated in Tafas, Heit and Deraa city, where former rebel commander Firas al-Masri was shot dead on October 18th. The consistency and frequency of assassinations in the south could however also suggest that pro-government cells use the insurgencies as cover for taking out former rivals. In any case the rate and style of attacks is expected to continue in November, as the US withdrawal from Syria has cast doubts about its rumoured plans to start supporting insurgents in Deraa from the defunct Military Operations Centre in Amman.



Map of Damascus and southern Syria



Coastal and central Syria

Coastal Syria

Going into November the security situation in the coastal region is unchanged and generally stable. The long-anticipated launch of another large pro-government ground offensive in north-eastern Latakia was postponed yet again due to the sudden and unexpected US withdrawal from the north-eastern border region, the subsequent Turkish military invasion, and the Syrian government's urgent need to deploy troops there to prevent a large land grab by Ankara (see more above). As a result, the Syrian army launched no ground offensives in the first 3½ weeks of October and instead continued to carry out stand-off bombardment with aircraft and artillery, especially against the jihadist bastion of Kabbani.

As in September, with the Syrian army holding its ground the jihadist-led rebels in the area took the initiative. On October 4th they attacked pro-government forces at Sarraf in the central sector of the front-line, and one week later a Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) Red Bands "special forces" unit ambushed Syrian army troops at Tallat Ziyara in the north-western part of the frontline at Jabal Turkman. These minor attacks did indicate serious intent to capture and hold ground by the rebels. In fact, they spent all October fortifying their defences and bringing in another estimated 500 jihadist fighters from Idlib to face the inevitable Syrian army offensive in north-eastern Latakia.

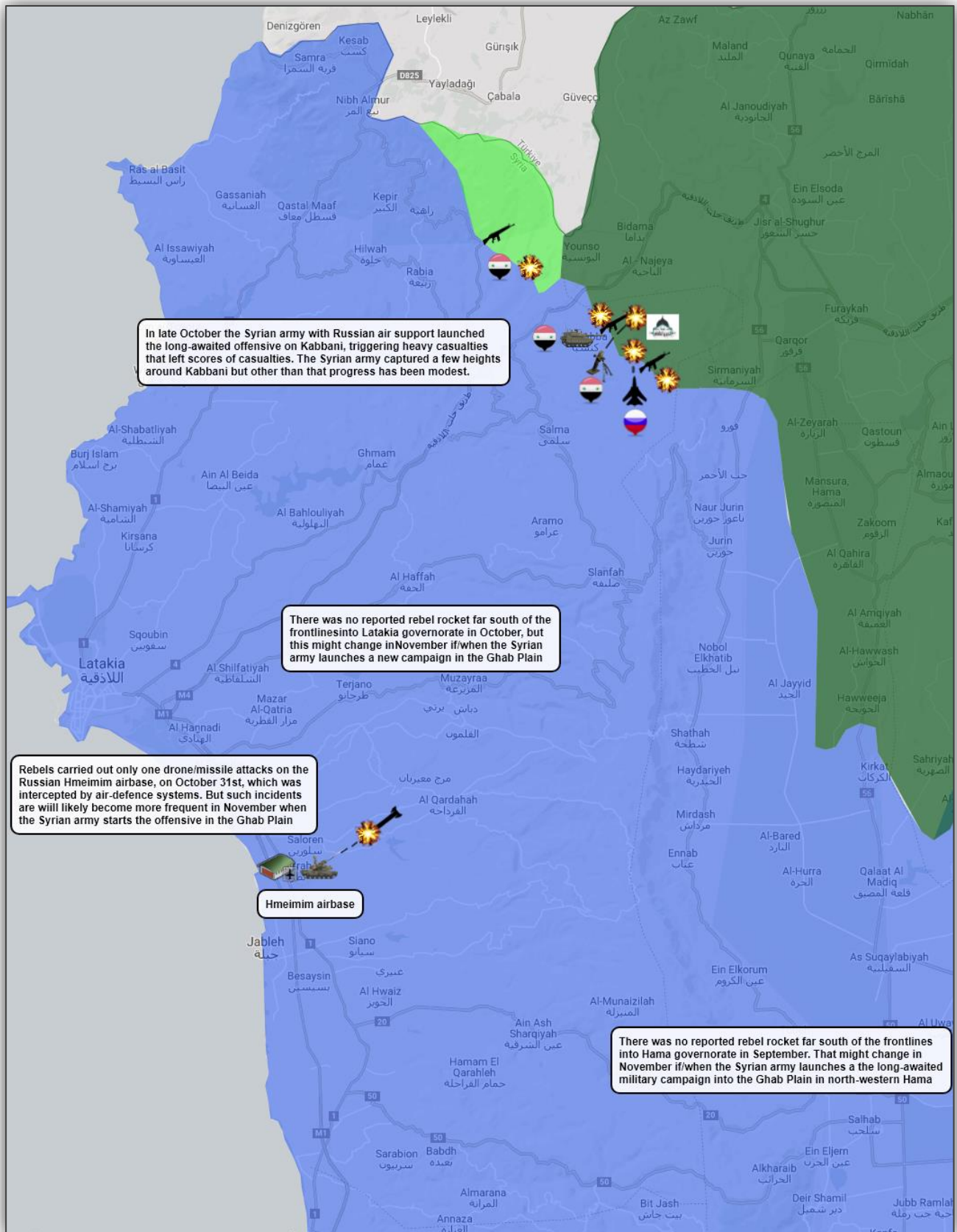
Once Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in north-eastern Syria began drawing to a close following the October 22nd meeting between presidents Putin and Erdogan, pro-government forces in north-eastern Latakia however resumed preparations for the offensive on Kabbani. It started just two days later when the Russian air force launched unusually fierce air bombardment of Kabbani and the Syrian army began another grinding ground offensive. The following day, pro-government forces captured another string of key hilltops around Kabbani, on which they began installing artillery units in preparation for the advance on the town itself. In order to pre-empt the pro-government offensive, jihadist rebels launched a counter-attack on October 26th but failed to recover any of the lost high ground and were instead forced to cease more hilltops, including Zuwaiqat hill, when the Syrian army offensive continued the next day. Since October 28th heavy clashes, artillery shelling and aerial bombardment has been ongoing in and around Kabbani and is expected to continue throughout November as pro-government forces now seem determined to follow through on the campaign to the seize north-eastern Latakia. However, entrenched rebel positions and tough terrain means further territorial gains will neither come easily or swiftly.

Central Syria

The situation in central Syria remains unchanged and generally stable going into November. In Homs governorate, there were no serious security incidents near the district capital or in the wider countryside extending all the way to the US-controlled Tanf pocket and Palmyra. In Hama, the rebel rocket fire deep into the governorate far from the frontlines that was so common in the first eight months of this year has all but subsided since the Syrian army concluded the Khan Sheikhoun campaign in late August. Since then, the christian towns around Suqailabiya and Mhardeh as well as Hama city have all been spared rebel attacks. In fact, since early September no rebel rocket fire has hit anywhere in Hama governorate except the northern sector of the Ghab Plain. The expected pro-government offensive there scheduled for early October was postponed for the same reasons as the planned assault in north-eastern Latakia, namely developments in north-eastern Syria. As a result, violence in the Ghab Plain was limited to isolated skirmishes and intermittent shelling. This is however expected to change in November given numerous reports that pro-government forces will soon launch the postponed offensive in the Ghab Plain since the situation in north-eastern Syria is somewhat calming down.



Map of coastal and central Syria



North-western Syria

Aleppo and surroundings

Going into November the security situation in and around Aleppo city remains largely unchanged and mostly stable. The amount of artillery and rocket fire between pro-government forces and rebels dropped significantly in the past month. There was only one incident of rebel rocket fire into the city in all of October, apparently the lowest number in any month since 2012. Similarly, Syrian army artillery fire against rebel positions west of the city also reached a new low with only three barrages seen over the full month. This drop in hostilities in and around Aleppo most likely reflected the withdrawal of rebel fighters from the region to participate in the Turkish offensive in north-east Syria and a shared desire by Ankara and Moscow to prevent violent flare-ups in other parts of the country when the situation along the northern border was being settled. The calm status quo in and around Aleppo city will likely prevail in November even if/when the Syrian army launches its next campaign in Idlib.

Northern Aleppo governorate

The security situation in the northern Aleppo countryside remains unchanged and unstable going into November. The kurdish-led insurgencies against Turkish occupation forces and their rebel allies from Afrin to al-Bab and Jarablus continued unabated with a total of 17 IED attacks, including three simultaneous motorcycle bombings in al-Rai, Jarablus, and Qabasin near al-Bab on October 5th. On October 31st a double IED attack in Afrin left several dozen casualties, including a prominent commander in the Turkish-backed rebel faction Sultan Murad Brigade. Insurgents also carried out a dozen assassinations and ambushes in the region as well as multiple infiltrations across the frontlines near Azaz. In a new trend, kurdish forces often shelled Turkish and rebel positions far from the frontlines in areas like Afrin, Azaz and Jarablus. This naturally came as a direct response to the Turkish invasion of north-eastern Syria.

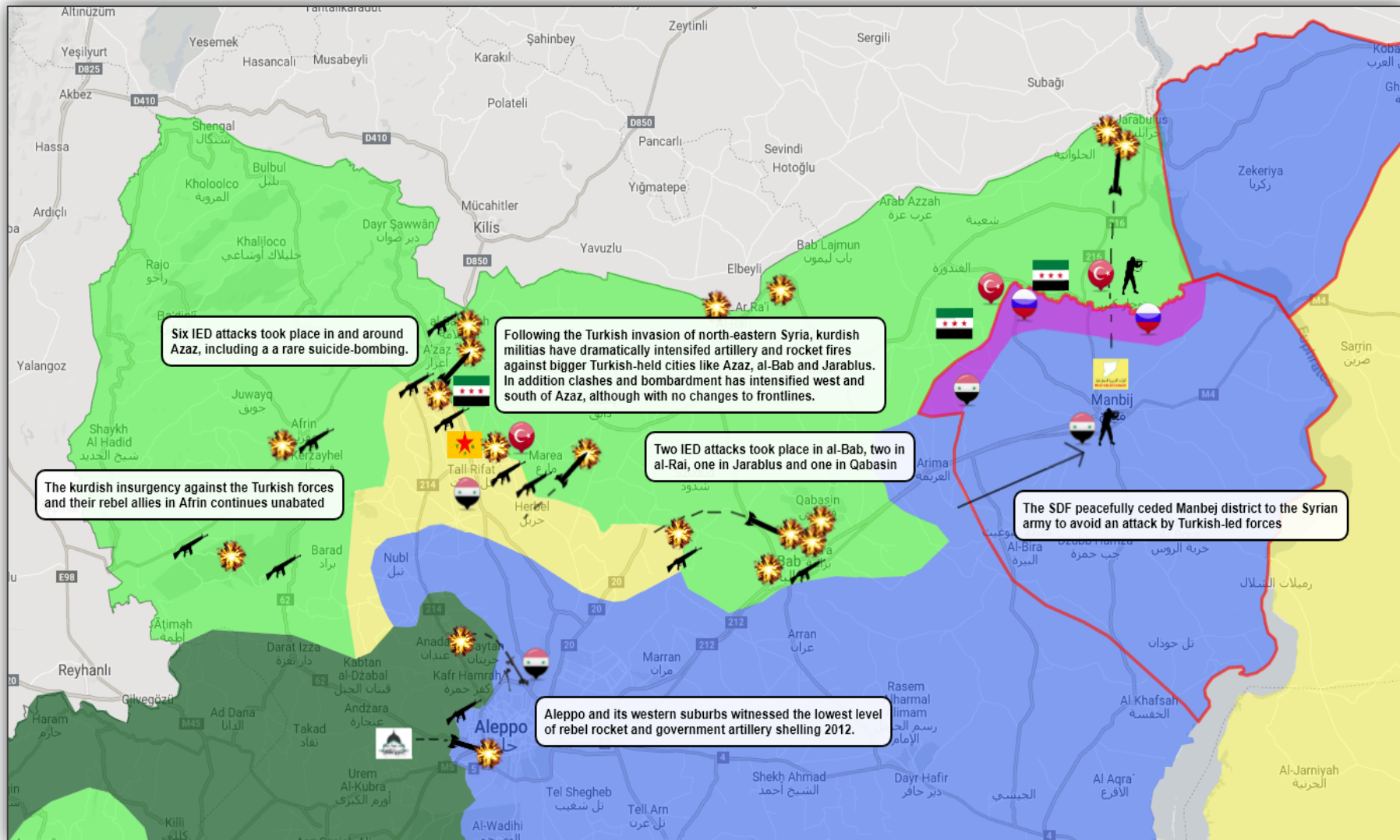
Despite the seemingly intensifying kurdish military operations, the Turkish military and its rebel allies did not carry out any major ground offensives in northern Aleppo, although they evidently wanted to. On October 12th Syrian army troops deployed to the Manbej outskirts to peacefully take over the city as part of a negotiated arrangement with the SDF after the controversial withdrawal of US forces from the border region. The following day, Turkish forces and rebel fighters began deploying massive reinforcements north of Manbej ahead of a planned offensive to conquer the city craved for so long by Ankara. However, the Syrian army entered the city first and by the 15th Russian military police had begun patrolling the frontlines north of Manbej to prevent a looming Turkish/rebel attack on the SAA/SDF-controlled city. Ankara and its allies were barely able to contain their frustration but prudently avoided attacking the Russian forces. Similarly, Russian units also carried out several patrols south of Azaz at Sherewa and Tal Rifaat to prevent a Turkish/rebel attack on pro-government forces and kurdish militias stationed in these locations. This uneasy status quo will likely continue in November, as Moscow and Ankara continue negotiations on potential, limited land swaps in the north-western countryside.



Syrian army soldiers entering outskirts of Manbej



Map of Aleppo governorate



Idlib governorate and surroundings

Going into November the military and security situation in and around Idlib, unexpectedly, remains unchanged since September. The next pro-government offensive expected in early October was postponed as a result of the sudden US withdrawal from the north-eastern border region, the Turkish invasion and its aftermath. As a result, there were no serious ground clashes anywhere along the frontlines around Idlib, although pro-government artillery and aircraft continued their heavy bombardment of rebel-held towns in the southern part of the governorate. With large numbers of Turkish-backed rebels redeployed away from Idlib for the offensive in the north-east, the number of inter-rebel assassinations and clashes also dropped dramatically. Nonetheless, carefully targeted killings of prominent jihadist figures continued. On October 11th a prominent Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leader was killed in a car bombing in Salqin, while one week later two key figures in Hurras al-Din died in a roadside bombing in Idlib city.

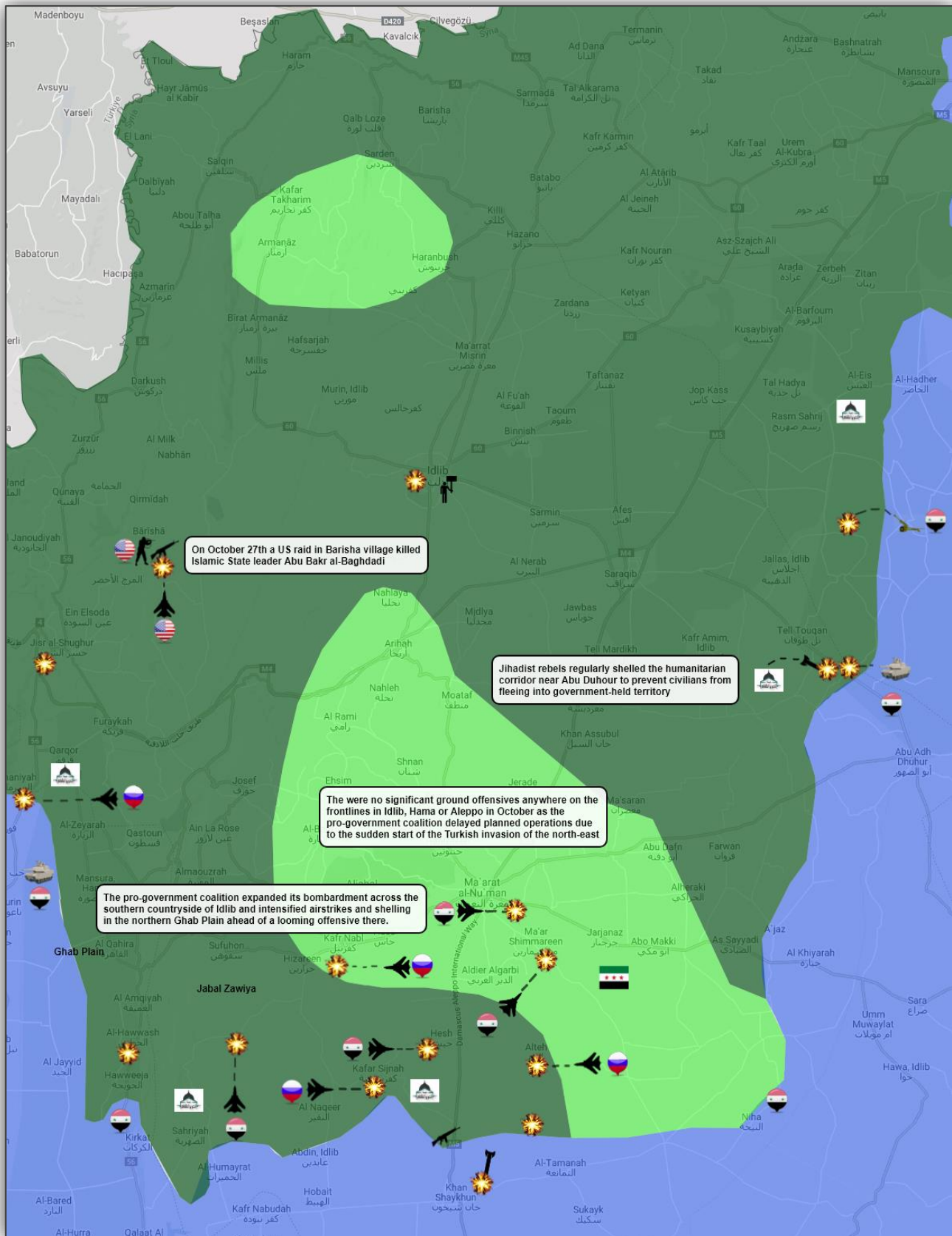
The most prominent killing of a jihadist leader however, involved arguably the most notorious one in the world. On October 27th a US raid including special forces and drones descended on the small town of Barisha in the north-western countryside of Idlib just 5 km from the Turkish border. The target was none other than Islamic State's "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He reportedly died while detonating a suicide vest during a standoff with US special forces, and shortly after his hideout was bombed to smithereens. In death, Baghdadi is enshrouded in as much mystery and speculation as in life. According to President Trump, the governments of Turkey, Russia, Iraq and even Syria as well as the SDF had played a role in enabling the US to track down and eliminate Baghdadi. Both Damascus and Moscow have denied any involvement and openly questioned the American claim of Baghdadi's killing. There are also widely differing reports on how long Baghdadi had stayed in north-western Idlib prior to his death, with some analysts claiming he had been there a few days while others said he was there many months.

A more important question than when or how Baghdadi arrived in Idlib is why. Most of Idlib is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a sworn enemy of IS since the HTS predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra and IS predecessor ISIS violently split in 2014. HTS was widely suspected of having shared information about Baghdadi's whereabouts with Turkish intelligence to pass on to the CIA. HTS has denied these allegations, claiming it knew nothing about Baghdadi's presence in Idlib. The SDF, meanwhile, argued that Baghdadi could not have stayed 5 km from the Turkish border without Ankara's knowledge, insinuating direct coordination between Ankara and Baghdadi. More credible reports clearly indicate that Baghdadi had paid to be hosted and protected by Hurras al-Din, a jihadist faction consisting of al-Qaeda loyalists who defected from HTS in 2017 and 2018 after it strayed too far from the path of jihad in their view. Baghdadi was supposedly working on a rapprochement between IS and al-Qaeda loyalists that would cover not only Syria but presumably apply to other areas where both groups are present and generally in conflict with each other. Baghdadi's interlocutors in this regard included not only Hurras al-Din members but reportedly also al-Qaeda loyalist jihadists from other factions, including some from HTS itself.

Regardless of its a priori chances of success, this bid for a grand jihadi rapprochement has most probably collapsed following Baghdadi's death. Other than that, the killing of the IS "caliph" will have a mostly symbolic impact. He had little involvement in the daily operations of the numerous IS cells scattered around Syria and the wider region who operate on a largely autonomous basis. In fact, IS may even ramp up attacks in Syria or neighbouring countries in the near term, not only as a revenge for Baghdadi's death but even more so for other reasons. When the Turkish invasion of north-eastern Syria began, the SDF suspended all anti-IS operations in its areas and has greatly downscaled, or in rare cases suspended, guarding IDP camps and prisons holding IS fighters and their families. On October 13th nearly 800 IS foreign fighters fled the Ain Issa camp following a direct Turkish artillery strike suspected of having this exact purpose. Four days later an IS cell attacked the Mahmoudi prison near Raqqa and released all jihadist prisoners after SDF vacated the facility. The release/escape of possibly more than 1,000 committed IS members will more than offset the operational impact of Baghdadi's death.



Map of Idlib governorate and surroundings



North-eastern Syria

The north-eastern border area

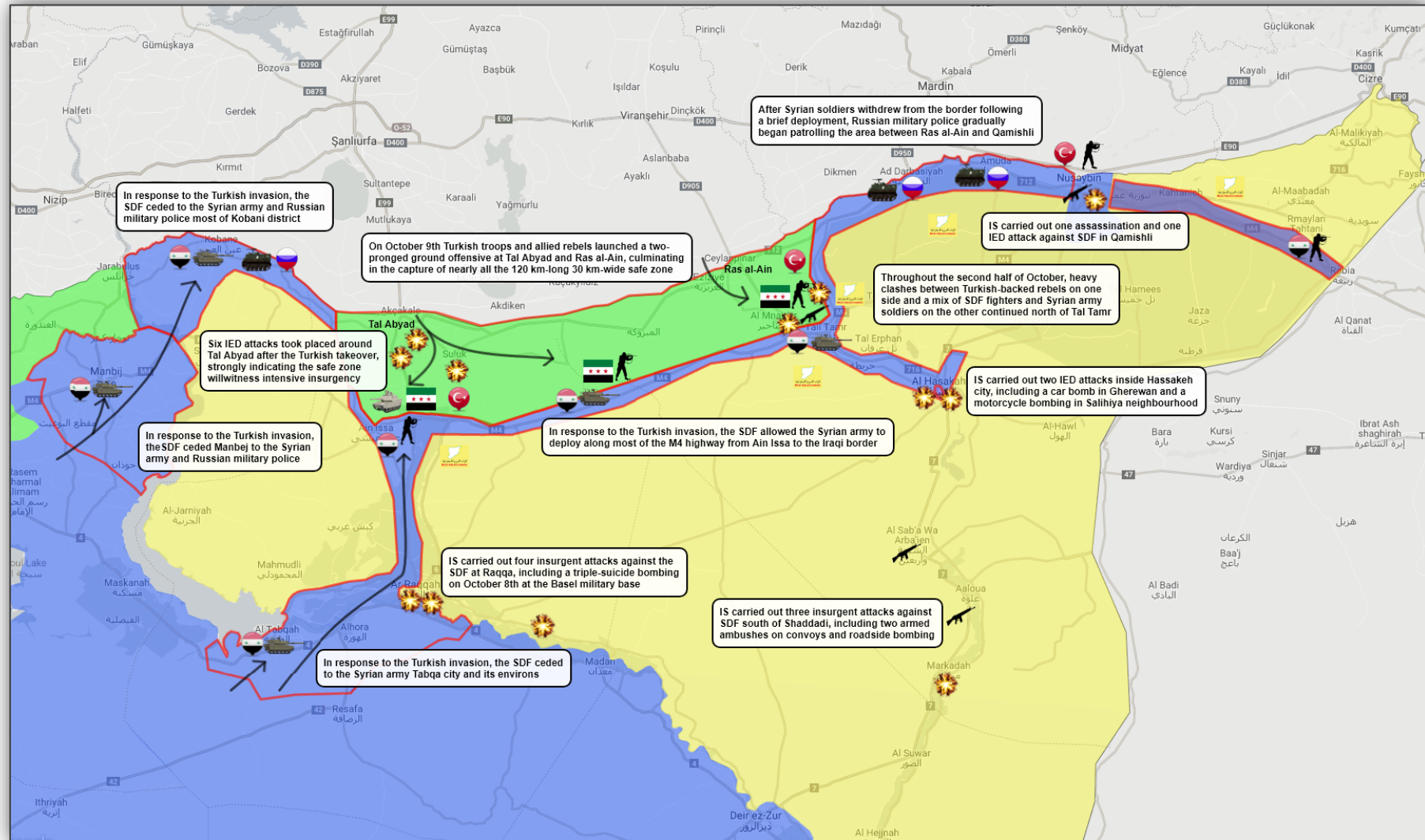
North-eastern Syria is witnessing the most significant security, military and geostrategic change since, arguably, the coalition intervention against Islamic State (IS) after the jihadist assault on Kobani in September 2014. Right after the October 7th US announcement of withdrawal from the border, Turkish aircraft and artillery started bombing kurdish positions along the entire border region, including all the main towns and cities. More than 200 locations were targeted by airstrikes alone. Two days later, President Erdogan announced the start of 'Operation Peace Spring' as Turkish troops and allied rebel factions launched two separate ground offensives on Tal Abyad in northern Raqqa and Ras al-Ain in north-western Hassakeh. Heavy clashes ensued as the SDF mounted an admirably determined resistance in the absence of external support. But material and numerical superiority guaranteed the invaders swift gains. On the offensive's first day, the Turkish army and the rebels captured around a dozen villages with two dozen more falling over the following three days. Although SDF counter-offensives allowed it to temporarily reclaim several towns, Tal Abyad fell on the 13th, Ras al-Ain was encircled, and the Turkish-led forces had several times successfully cut the strategic M4 highway at multiple locations. Ankara was thus seemingly on track to unilaterally implementing the 30 km wide so-called safe zone.

Facing disaster, the SDF suspended all anti-IS operations and called on the Syrian army to help repel the Turkish aggressors on October 9th. Four days later, SDF announced that it had reached an agreement with the Syrian army and the next day President Trump even invited the Syrian government to protect the kurds. Damascus accepted the invitation. On the 14th Syrian soldiers began arriving in Ain Issa in northern Raqqa, at Tal Tamr in Hassakeh as well as in Manbej and Kobani as part of a wider deployment along the M4 to prevent the highway from falling into Turkish and rebel hands. Simultaneously, Syrian soldiers also took over Tabqa city, its airbase and surrounding villages south-west of Raqqa. The massive deployment of pro-government forces succeeded in preventing Turkish forces and their rebel allies from advancing deeper than 30 km into north-eastern Syria, but also delayed planned Syrian army offensives in north-west Syria (see more above). In a desperate bid to prevent the SDF from ceding more territory to the Syrian army, the US on October 17th announced a 120-hour ceasefire deal with Turkey, which Turkish-backed rebels around Ras al-Ain however completely ignored. Just before the ceasefire expired, Presidents Putin and Erdogan reached a long-term arrangement for the north-eastern border-region (see more above) and fighting gradually subsided in most areas. There were no further ground clashes, artillery barrages or airstrikes reported anywhere along the border with Raqqa nor along the part of the Hassakeh border east of Qamishli. However, despite a stipulated ceasefire, Turkish-backed rebels continued to attack joint SDF/SAA forces in the eastern sectors of the safe zone north of Tal Tamr. As explained above, the ongoing fighting most likely reflects a joint Russo-Turkish understanding to keep up military pressure on the SDF until it withdraws all its forces 30 km from the entire length of the border. The ongoing fighting north of Tal Tamr is therefore expected to continue until SDF complies, but the risk of the violence spreading elsewhere is relatively low.

As predicted last month, the renewed conflict between Turkey and the SDF coincided with a resurgence of Islamic State insurgent operations against the SDF across the north-east. The jihadist group carried out more than a dozen attacks against the SDF in October, including a triple-suicide bombing in Raqqa on the eve of the Turkish invasion and two car bombs in Qamishli on the 11th and 12th. Separately, the Turkish controlled zone is already becoming a centre of insurgent attacks. On October 23rd, 24th and 25th three car bombs exploded in Suluk, Tal Abyad and Hammam Turkman, causing dozens of casualties including from Failaq al-Majd, which had shared a video of its fighters proudly mutilating kurdish prisoners of war, including women. This suggests the new Turkish safe zone will see intense insurgent activity.



Map of north-eastern Syria



Situation in Deir al-Zour governorate

Going into November the situation in Deir al-Zour governorate remains largely unchanged. The local tensions between pro-government forces and the SDF in Deir al-Zour reflecting the broader geostrategic struggle related to the reopening of the al-Bukamal border-crossing with Iraq eased in early October due to the Turkish invasion of north-eastern Syria. The SDF and, a bit later, pro-government forces were both forced to redeploy troops to the north-east to resist the invasion of the Turkish military and its allies. Not only are the two sides increasingly united against a greater shared enemy, but the SDF and the Syrian army likely both calculate that the unfolding US-led coalition withdrawal from Syria leaves the SDF with very limited leverage vis-à-vis Damascus and Moscow. Certainly, the SDF now holds few illusions about its ability to keep eastern Deir al-Zour governorate in the long term and surely considers “trading” this for major concessions from the Syrian government.

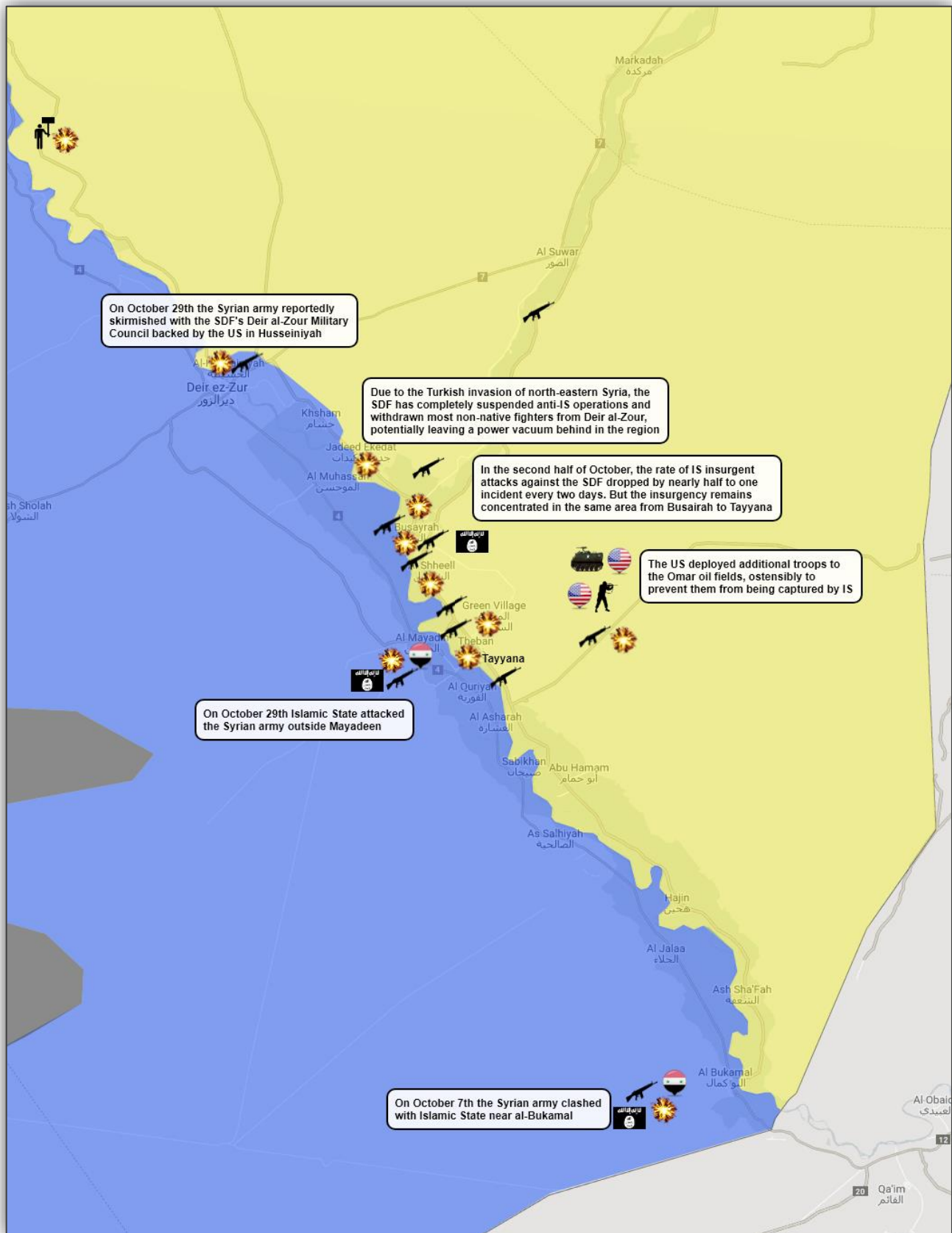
In other words, neither the SDF nor the Syrian army sees any reason for a military engagement to decide the fate of eastern Deir al-Zour. The issue is now set to be settled much sooner than seemed the case on October 1st, but a solution is still not imminent. First of all, the shared threat of the joint Turkish/rebel force needs to be sufficiently contained before negotiations for the SDF-held areas in Deir al-Zour and elsewhere can commence. Secondly, US troops remain present in and around the oil fields east of the Euphrates and have even increased their military footprint there, ostensibly to prevent oil fields from falling into IS hands now that the SDF is busy with other matters. The Trump administration in typical fashion gives contradicting statements about the plans for the US troops at the oil fields. Some officials indicate that they will leave soon, presumably when all other US troops have left Syria and/or when the SDF has negotiated a deal with Damascus. Other officials suggest that the US will keep control of the oil on the medium term, a plan that would surely expose US servicemen to heightened risk now that relations with the SDF ground partners have suffered irreparable damage and would undermine prospects of a peaceful restoration of Syrian government control east of the Euphrates negotiated with the SDF.

Parallel to the wider geopolitical developments, IS continued its insurgent operations in Deir al-Zour, mainly against the SDF east of the Euphrates. In the first half of October, IS attacks against SDF continued at the usual rate of one per day, and concentrated in the usual hotspot between Busairah and Tayyana. However, in the second half of the month the rate of attacks suddenly dropped by nearly half, with “only” nine incidents reported in the last 16 days of October. This development was unexpected, especially as the escape/release of hundreds of IS fighters from SDF prisons would be expected to fuel the insurgency. One possible explanation is that the withdrawal of many SDF fighters has allowed IS cells to flee elsewhere, either Iraq, Turkey (and from there further abroad) or, equally plausibly, the border areas captured by the Turkish army and its rebel allies in Raqqah and Hassakeh. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, several prominent IS members have been sighted walking the streets of Tal Abyad in broad daylight since the city’s fall to the Turkish-led coalition, another indicator of covert co-operation between IS and the rebels and/or the Turkish government. In any case, it remains to be seen if the recent drop in IS attacks against SDF in Deir al-Zour was coincidental or will continue in November.

IS attacks against pro-government forces meanwhile did not witness any noticeable decrease. The jihadist group carried out two attacks against pro-government forces along the Euphrates (in Mayadeen and Quriyah) and clashed with the Syria army three times around the town of Sukhna on the Palmyra-Deir al-Zour highway west of the administrative border with Homs. At least one encounter involved jihadists trying to fight their way to the Iraqi border, an early indicator that the Turkish invasion has indeed geographically dispersed the IS threat, not only within Syria but also to neighbouring countries.



Map of Deir al-Zour governorate



Future developments



Political developments

The Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) will continue its work on constitutional reform after finally holding its first meeting in Geneva on October 30th. But the few details emerging from the session make it unclear if any tangible progress was made and what are the medium-term prospects. But if Bashar al-Assad's speech the following day is any indication, significant progress does not seem forthcoming. The president emphasized that the SCC's work should be an entirely internal Syrian matter, a tough task considering that it is headed by UN Envoy Geir Pedersen, that the Astana sponsors Turkey and Russia played a central role in selecting the committee members, and that large sections of the opposition delegation are seen as subordinate to regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who amongst themselves have differing agendas. The SCC's work is bound to remain heavily internationalized and dependent of the geostrategic interests of foreign great powers, first and foremost Turkey and Russia. It remains to be seen to what extent Damascus can push back against political concessions offered by Moscow to Ankara and the opposition regarding the Syrian constitution. But the Syrian government has certainly demonstrated ability and willingness to delay foreign diplomatic dictates. The Astana sponsors may even be reluctant to push the diplomatic process forward before the looming battle for the north-west is decided and the situation in the north-east becomes clear, especially regarding the US role.



Security developments

Turkey and Russia will continue to cooperate on the implementation of the October 22nd agreement for north-east Syria. If all goes as planned, this will entail Russo-Turkish ground patrols in the 10 km-wide corridors west and east of the Turkish zone between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain. No major clashes or bombardment are expected in these corridors or near Ain Issa in the south-western corner of the safe zone. Rather, clashes between the Turkish army and its allied rebels on one hand and the Syrian army and the SDF on the other will remain concentrated in the area north of Tal Tamr, although it is unclear where exactly the eastern boundary of the safe zone is located on paper. Fighting north of Tal Tamr will likely continue until SDF withdraws 30 km from the entire length of the border.

Herein lies the challenge to the October 22nd agreement. If SDF continues to refuse to complete the stipulated withdrawal, Turkey may opt to expand hostilities to areas outside the safe zone such as Tal Tamr itself or east of Qamishli. This would likely require – and get – approval from Russia, which is committed to ensuring the SDF withdrawal from the border and will allow Ankara military leeway to achieve this. However, if military operations by the Turkish army and its rebel allies expand beyond the current front north of Tal Tamr, there is increased risk that the Syrian army will get sucked in or that even Russian personnel will be involved. This would naturally complicate Moscow and Ankara's desire to manage the violence in the north-east and implement the October 22nd agreement. Likely to increase the risk of such complications, some US forces have actually returned to the border region, where they seemingly provide some cover to the SDF and deny Turkish and Russian aircraft access to much of the airspace.

In north-western Syria the battle for Latakia's north-eastern regions has already begun and the pro-government coalition is finally expected – after many delays – to launch the long-awaited offensive into the Ghab Plain and adjacent areas in south-western Idlib. The exact timing will however depend on the pace of the Syrian army's progress in Latakia as well as the unfolding of the ongoing battles in the north-east. Finally, the various deadly insurgencies in both northern Aleppo, in Raqqa, Hassakeh, Deir al-Zour and Deraa are all expected to continue unabated throughout November.



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