



European Asylum Support Office

EASO COI Meeting Report

Syria

30 November & 1 December 2017

Valletta, Malta



March 2018

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Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War

Esther van Eijk, Maastricht University

Fabrice Balanche, University of Lyon 2 and Hoover Institution, Stanford University

UNHCR

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Table of Contents | 4 |
| Disclaimer | 5 |
| Glossary and Abbreviations..... | 6 |
| Introduction..... | 10 |
| Map of Syria..... | 11 |
| 1. Security situation (C. Kozak, ISW) | 12 |
| 1.1 Overview of Current Conflict Trends | 12 |
| 1.2 Local De-Escalation Zones / Administrations..... | 16 |
| 1.2.1 Southern Syria Ceasefire Zone..... | 16 |
| 1.2.2 Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) Zone | 17 |
| 1.2.3 Damascus Local Ceasefire Deals | 19 |
| 1.2.4 Greater Idlib Province | 21 |
| 1.3 Future of Syria as a Functional State?..... | 24 |
| 2. Pro-Assad forces (C. Kozak, ISW) | 25 |
| 2.1 Syrian Arab Ba’ath Party | 25 |
| 2.2 Syrian Intelligence Services..... | 26 |
| 2.3 Syrian Arab Army (SAA)..... | 27 |
| 2.4 Pro-Regime paramilitaries | 29 |
| 2.5 Pro-regime foreign intervention | 32 |
| 2.6 Pro-regime foreign fighters..... | 34 |
| 2.7 Locating specific units and identifying command structures | 37 |
| Question and Answer..... | 37 |
| 3. Family law (E. van Eijk)..... | 42 |
| 3.1 Family law in Syria: Historical developments..... | 42 |
| 3.2 Family law in Syria: A plural legal landscape..... | 43 |
| 3.3 Marriage..... | 46 |
| 3.4 Dissolution of marriage | 49 |
| 3.5 Child custody..... | 51 |
| 3.6 Question and Answer..... | 51 |
| 4. New protection considerations for Syria (UNHCR)..... | 52 |
| 5. Situation in Kurdish areas/Rojava (F. Balanche)..... | 53 |
| 5.1 Military, sectarian, and administrative divisions | 53 |
| 5.2 Qamishli | 58 |
| 5.3 Hasakah..... | 61 |
| 5.4 Question and Answer..... | 62 |
| 6. Socio-economic aspects of the conflict (F. Balanche) | 67 |
| Question and Answer..... | 81 |
| Annex: Reading suggestions from speakers..... | 83 |

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This meeting report has been drafted by EASO on the basis of presentations, discussions, and participants' notes to highlight the main content of the meeting and does not purport to reflect the entire proceedings. Content from the meeting has been adapted for readability and usability within this report. Variations in style, terminology, and spellings used by different speakers may also appear.

The external speakers validated the information in this report and have given their consent to be quoted publicly from this report. Information provided by an external speaker in this report should be cited under the name of the speaker and the context in which it was delivered. For example:

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The target users for this report are asylum caseworkers, COI researchers, policymakers, and decision-making authorities.

Glossary and Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| AQ | Al-Qaeda; militant Sunni Salafist Jihadist armed group active internationally; HTS is its affiliate in Syria |
| Ahrar al-Sham | Sunni Salafist Jihadist armed group active in Syria, particularly Idlib Province; historical ‘partner’ of HTS in Syria |
| Ba’ath Party (Syria) | Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party; the ruling political party in Syria headed by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad |
| Hasakah | Al-Hasakah; the name of both a governorate and its capital city; located in the furthest north-east corner of Syria |
| Daesh | Also referred to as Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); Sunni Salafist Jihadist extremist group active internationally |
| DFNS | Democratic Federation of Northern Syria; also called Rojava in Kurdish; the <i>de facto</i> autonomous region in Northern Syria composed of three cantons - Afrin, Kobane, and Cizire (Jazira) - and led by the Syrian Kurdish PYD |
| Faylaq al-Rahman | Sunni Islamist armed opposition group active in Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus; rival of Salafist Jihadist group Jaysh al Islam |
| Fiqh | Islamic jurisprudence; the Hanafi school is prevalent in Syria; Hanafi is Sunni <i>fiqh</i> and underlies the Syrian Law on Personal Status (SLPS) |
| FSA | Free Syrian Army; a loose umbrella coalition of armed opposition groups against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad |
| Harakat al-Nujaba | Iraqi Shia Islamist armed militant group backed by Iran and active on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| Hezbollah | Lebanese Hezbollah; Lebanese Shia Islamist armed militant group backed by Iran and active on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| HNDZ | Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki; Sunni Islamist armed opposition group active in Northern Syria; former component of HTS |
| HTS | Hayat Tahrir al-Sham; Sunni Salafist Jihadist armed militant group; formal affiliate of Al-Qaeda in Syria |
| Iranian Corridor | Iran’s strategy to build a ground line of communication from the Iran to the Mediterranean via allied groups in Iraq and Syria |
| IRGC | Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; branch of the Iranian Armed Forces charged with defending the Islamic Revolution; active on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| Jaysh al-Islam | Sunni Salafist Jihadist armed opposition group active in Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus; rival of Faylaq al-Rahman |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Kata'ib Hezbollah | Iraqi Shia Islamist armed militant group backed by Iran and active on behalf of Assad in Syria; designated foreign terrorist organization by the US State Department |
| Kobani | Also referred to as Ayn al-Arab; majority-Kurdish town in Aleppo Governorate on the Syrian-Turkish Border |
| Liwa Fatimiyoun | Afghan Shia Islamist armed militant group recruited, trained, and funded by Iran to fight on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| Liwa Zeinabiyoun | Pakistani Shia Islamist armed militant group recruited, trained, and funded by Iran to fight on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| LSY | Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade; affiliate of IS/Daesh in Southern Syria; now referred to as Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid |
| Mukhala'a divorce | Divorce by 'mutual consent'; wife initiated |
| Mukhabarat | Arabic term for 'intelligence'; usually refers to the Syrian intelligence services |
| NDF | National Defence Forces; national umbrella organisation of irregular pro-regime fighters trained by Iran and Hezbollah |
| OES | Operation Euphrates Shield; a <i>de facto</i> 'safe zone' created by Turkey as a buffer and base of operations in Northern Syria |
| Peshmerga | Kurdish military forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) |
| PFLP-GC | Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command; Palestinian armed militant group active on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| PKK | Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); a Kurdish armed militant group fighting an active insurgency in Turkey; also active in Syria, Iraq, and Iran |
| PLA | Palestinian Liberation Army; an affiliate unit of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) conscripted from Palestinian-Syrians |
| PMU/PMF | Popular Mobilisation Units/Popular Mobilisation Forces; national umbrella organization of irregular fighters mobilized by the Government of Iraq; dominated by Iraqi Shia Islamist armed militant groups backed by Iran; some components active on behalf of Assad in Syria |
| PYD | Democratic Union Party; dominant Syrian Kurdish political party that maintains armed wing in the Syrian Kurdish YPG; affiliated with the PKK |
| Qutaa System | A military administrative system created by former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad whereby combat divisions are assigned specific geographical sectors (<i>qutaa</i>) and population centers with wide discretionary powers granted to military commanders; designed to |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| | subvert defections by giving officers free reign to extract patronage from their assigned <i>qutaa</i> |
| Rojava | Democratic Federation of Northern Syria; also called Rojava in Kurdish; the <i>de facto</i> autonomous region in Northern Syria composed of three cantons - Afrin, Kobane, and Cizire (Jazira) - and led by the Syrian Kurdish PYD |
| SAA | Syrian Arab Army; formal land forces of the Syrian Armed Forces |
| SDF | Syrian Defense Forces; umbrella organization of armed groups active against IS/Daesh in Syria led by the Syrian Kurdish YPG; backed by the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition |
| Shabiha | Members of historical Syrian Alawite criminal networks on the Syrian Coast; leveraged by Assad to forcibly disrupt protests at the start of the Syrian Revolution; used as a blanket derogatory term by opposition to refer to all irregular pro-regime forces |
| Shammar Tribe | Sunni Arab tribe located in Northern Syria along the Syrian-Iraqi Border; close partnership with the Syrian Kurdish PYD |
| sharia | <i>shar'iyah</i> ; Islamic law |
| Sheikh Maqsood | Majority-Kurdish neighbourhood of Aleppo City controlled by the Syrian Kurdish YPG |
| SIG | Syrian Interim Government; the alternative government-in-exile of Syria formed by an umbrella of political opposition groups; based in Turkey |
| SLPS | Syrian Law of Personal Status of 1953; regulates family law in Syria |
| Sootoro | Regional irregular armed group in Hasakah Governorate; composed of local ethnic Assyrians and Christians supportive of Assad in Syria |
| Sotoro | Regional irregular armed group in Hasakah Governorate; composed of local ethnic Assyrians and Christians supportive of the Syrian Kurdish PYD; also referred to as <i>Sutoro</i> |
| Suqour al-Sahara | Desert Hawks; former irregular armed group supportive of Assad in Syria backed by wealthy Syrian Alawites |
| talaq | Unilateral divorce in Islam; only available to men |
| Tel Abyad | Majority-Sunni Arab town and district in Raqqah Governorate on the Syrian-Turkish Border |
| 'urfi marriages | Unregistered customary marriages in Islam |
| YPG | People's Protection Units; Syrian Kurdish irregular armed group active in Northern Syria; armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish PYD |
| YPJ | Women's Protection Units; Syrian Kurdish all-female affiliate of the Syrian Kurdish YPG |

Introduction

On 30 November and 1 December, EASO organised a meeting for the members of EASO's Syria COI specialists network. These are specialists and researchers who focus on Syria and the region. It was attended by COI research specialists from 20 EU+¹ countries.

The purpose of the meeting was to facilitate discussions among participants on key issues in Syria relevant to COI researchers, to update each other on recent information needs and new national products, and to discuss future joint activities. Norway and Sweden discussed recent fact-finding missions. External experts and organisations mentioned in the [acknowledgements section](#) of this report gave presentations on recent developments and specific topics requested.

This meeting report presents information from the external expert presentations and 'question and answer' sessions.

The external speakers invited to give presentations were:

Christopher Kozak, is a Senior Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) where he focuses on Syria with an emphasis on the Assad Regime and Iran in the Syrian Civil War. He is the author of *An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria* and has published numerous articles on various actors in the Syrian Civil War, including ISIS, Syrian Kurds, and pro-regime foreign fighters. He has also been invited to provide briefings to political leaders, military officers, and intelligence officials from the U.S. as well as foreign allies.

Dr. Esther van Eijk, an affiliated researcher at Maastricht University who specialises in (religious) family law, particularly in Syria. She has researched and published extensively on Syrian family law issues, including completing ethnographic field research in Syria. She is the author of *Family Law in Syria: Patriarchy, Pluralism and Personal Status Laws*, published by I.B. Tarsus in 2016.

Dr. Fabrice Balanche, an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2 and a Visiting Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. He focuses on political geography of conflict and development in the Middle East and Syria. His work has focused on analysing the evolution of the Syrian conflict through the study of territory and political power. His publications include *Geopolitics of the Middle East* (2014, in French), *Atlas of the Near East* (2012, in English, French, and Arabic), the book version of his thesis, *The Alawite Region and Syrian Power* (2006, in French), and many articles on Syria and Middle East. His latest book, *Sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War* (in English), was published in February 2018.

UNHCR, UNHCR gave a presentation on new protection considerations for Syria.

¹ EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

Map of Syria



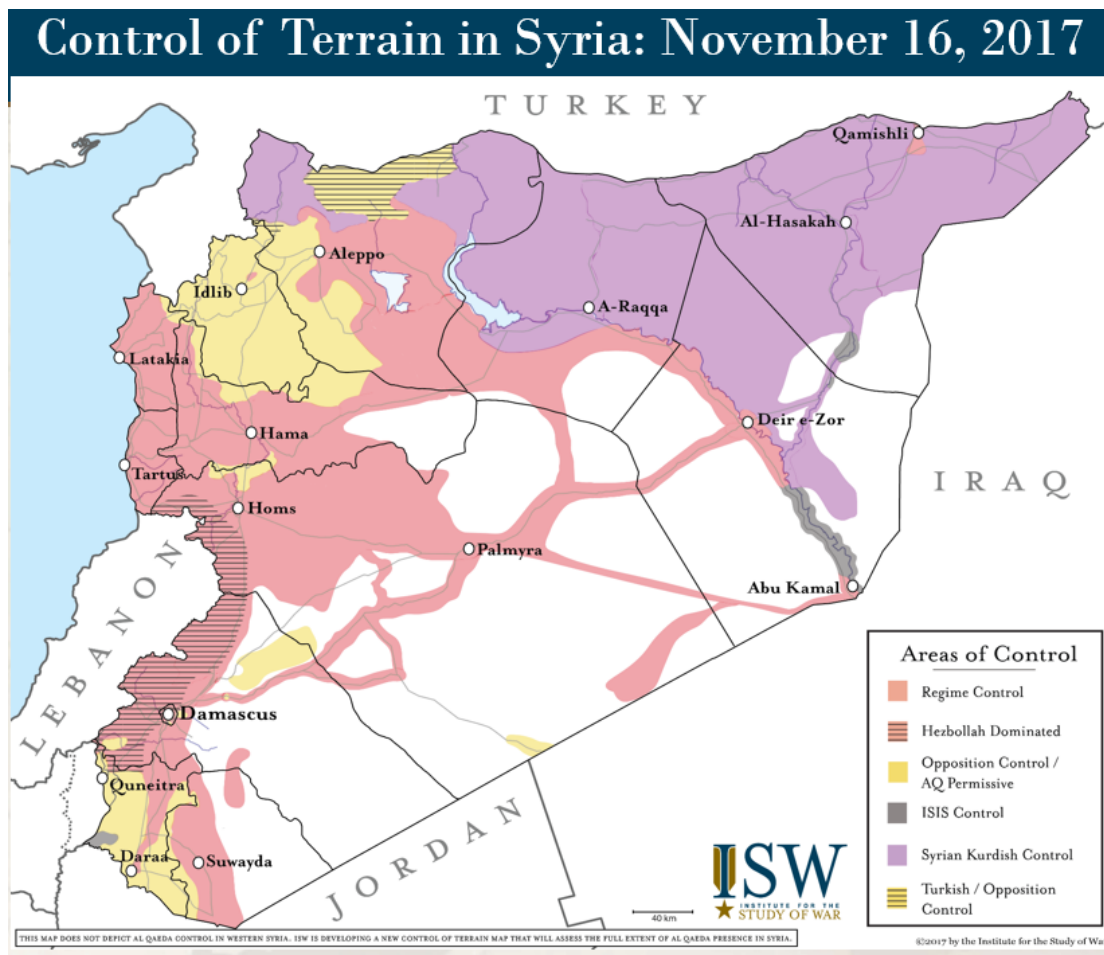
Map: United Nations, Syrian Arab Republic (Map No. 4203 Rev. 3), © United Nations

1. Security situation (C. Kozak, ISW)

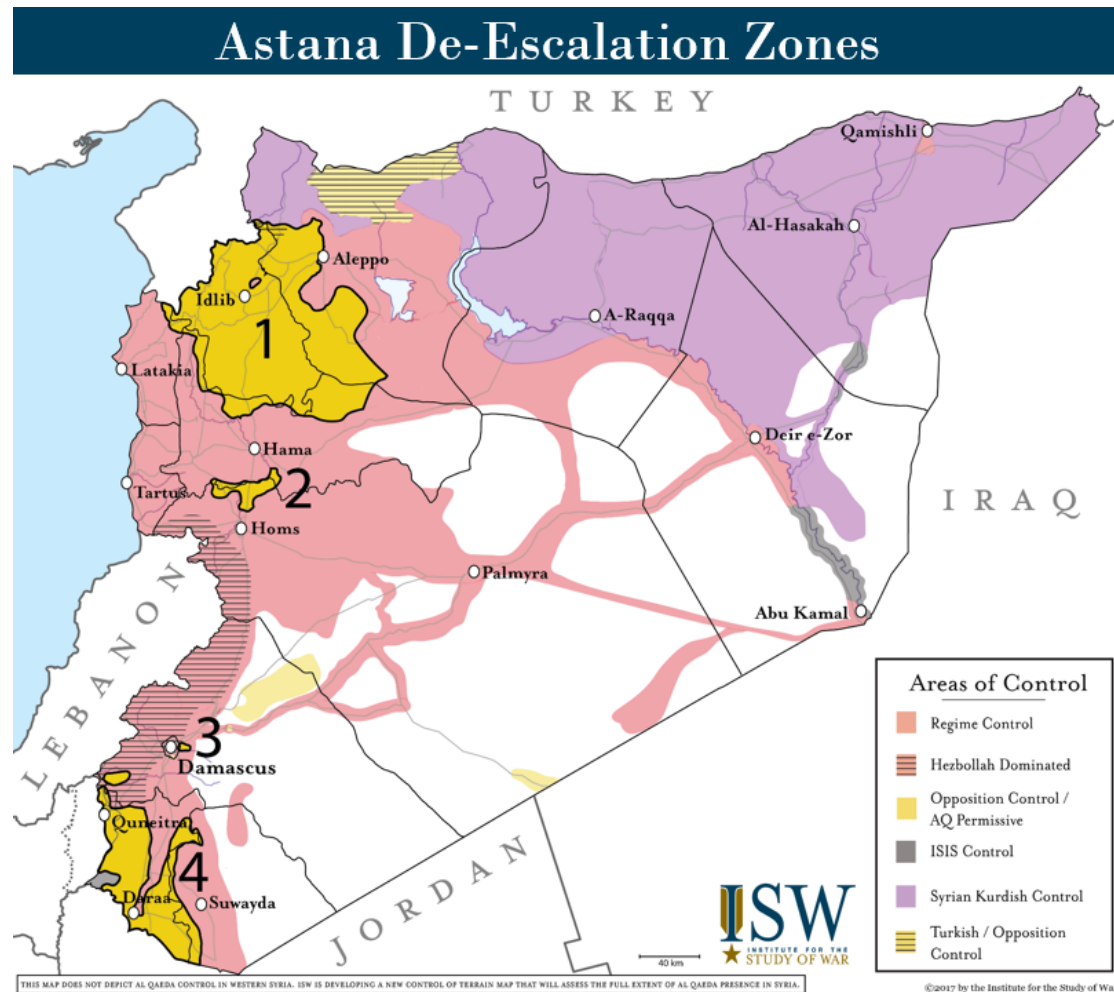
1.1 Overview of Current Conflict Trends

The Syrian Civil War is set to enter a new yet no less dangerous phase of conflict. It may on its face seem like a less violent phase, but it is not a post-war phase; it is a new manifestation of the conflict. There is a strong push by certain countries - both those that are in the Pro-Regime Coalition and others - to present the war as winding down and rush towards reconstruction. So I want to start with top line trends and move to some case studies.

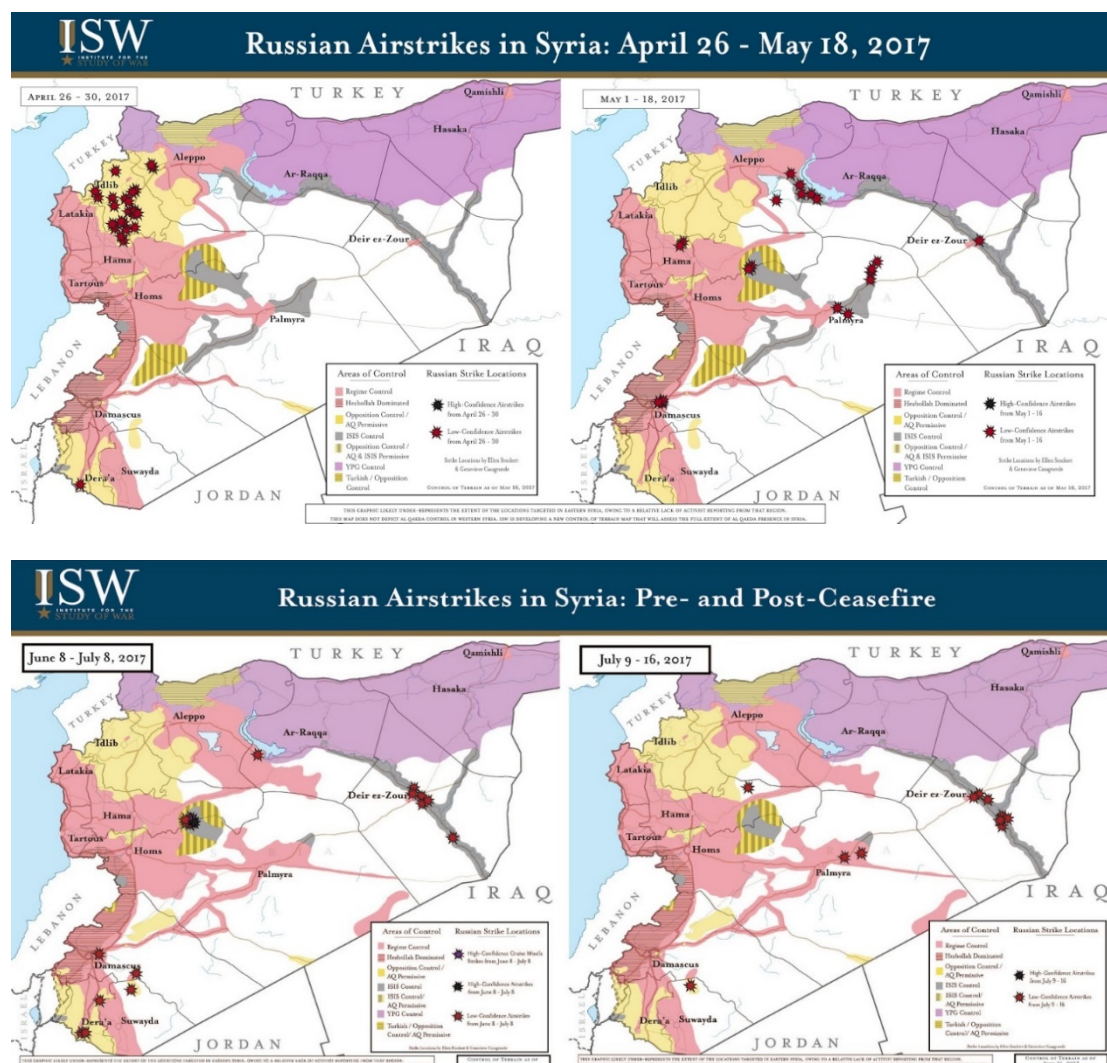
Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is now more secure than any other point since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. He has regained large swaths of terrain - particularly in Eastern Syria - since the fall of Aleppo City in December 2016 (**Map: Control of Terrain in Syria: November 16, 2017**).



These gains are partly due to the creation of de-escalation zones brokered by Turkey, Iran, and Russia at the Astana Talks. The zones include local ceasefires which have more or less held to varying degrees, although conditions are widely different across the ostensible de-escalation zones. One function these zones did achieve was to reduce some of the pressure on the pro-regime coalition and allow them to refocus assets east toward Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa Provinces (**Map: Astana De-Escalation Zones**). The Astana Talks and its implementation of four de-escalation zones thus reduced strain on Assad.



If you look at the Russian airstrikes map below (**Map: Russian Airstrikes in Syria**) – you can see that the pro-regime campaign actually did shift away from Idlib Province and towards Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor Provinces starting in April/May 2017. This shift has driven new flows of refugees and IDPs coming out of eastern Syria – both moving north into Rojava and south to the Syrian-Jordanian border. The pro-regime coalition did not conduct this shift solely to counter ISIS, but also to constrain the anti-ISIS U.S. coalition in eastern Syria. Note that the shift from eastern to western Syria occurred after the U.S. conducted cruise missile strikes targeting the Shayrat Airbase near Homs City in April 2017. The regime needed time and space to redeploy its assets because for a long time the war in the east had lingered as a kind of ‘forgotten fight’ while pro-regime forces focused on the conflict in the west.



The second key trend is that the regime has simultaneously neutralised the threat posed by the Syrian opposition in western Syria through both the establishment of the de-escalation zones as well as the implementation of military sieges - the so-called ‘siege and starve campaign’ - to isolate, besiege, and force the surrender of opposition-held neighbourhoods, districts, and towns. This effort has unfortunately been proceeding rather effectively for the regime. We’ve seen numerous negotiated surrenders and evacuations in the opposition-held suburbs of Damascus over the past year as well as the evacuation of the Wa’er District of Homs City. There has also been a successful campaign over the past year by Lebanese Hezbollah to clear the Syrian-Lebanese border of ISIS, AQ, and other opposition groups in the

Qalamoun Mountains. These gains have allowed the pro-regime coalition to consolidate terrain in western Syria and start 'cleaning up the lines' by constraining the opposition to more and more fragmented pockets that can be prioritized one at a time rather than distributed countrywide. Nonetheless, Assad remains unable to win a decisive military victory – this is a key point. Even as these gains are happening on the ground, we are not moving towards a regime military victory by any means. Assad continues to face a critical manpower shortage; we have seen the ramifications of this shortage through the continued back-and-forth over the past year with ISIS in Qaryatayn and Palmyra in Homs Province as well as similar struggles to clear ISIS in Deir ez-Zor Province. Assad continues to rely on, and require, support from foreign backers such as Russia and Iran to maintain security and thus, in my assessment, Syria still faces the prospect of a long term insurgency and instability.

At the same time, if we look outside of the pro-regime coalition, we face many other intersecting issues. For one, Al Qaeda is advancing its efforts to infiltrate and subvert opposition-held areas of Syria. The basic premise is that as the opposition forces have come under increasing pressure and constraints, AQ has positioned itself to take over opposition governance institutions and military leadership, eliminate rival factions, and ultimately position itself for a resurgence in Idlib Province and other parts of Syria. Al-Qaeda is advancing its efforts to infiltrate, subvert, and transform the Syrian Opposition. The opposition is a continuum and Al-Qaeda is pulling factions further along that spectrum towards Salafi Jihadism. ISW ultimately expects that after pro-regime forces successfully clear eastern Syria they will face a long-term AQ-lead insurgency that replaces or occurs in tandem with an ISIS-led insurgency.

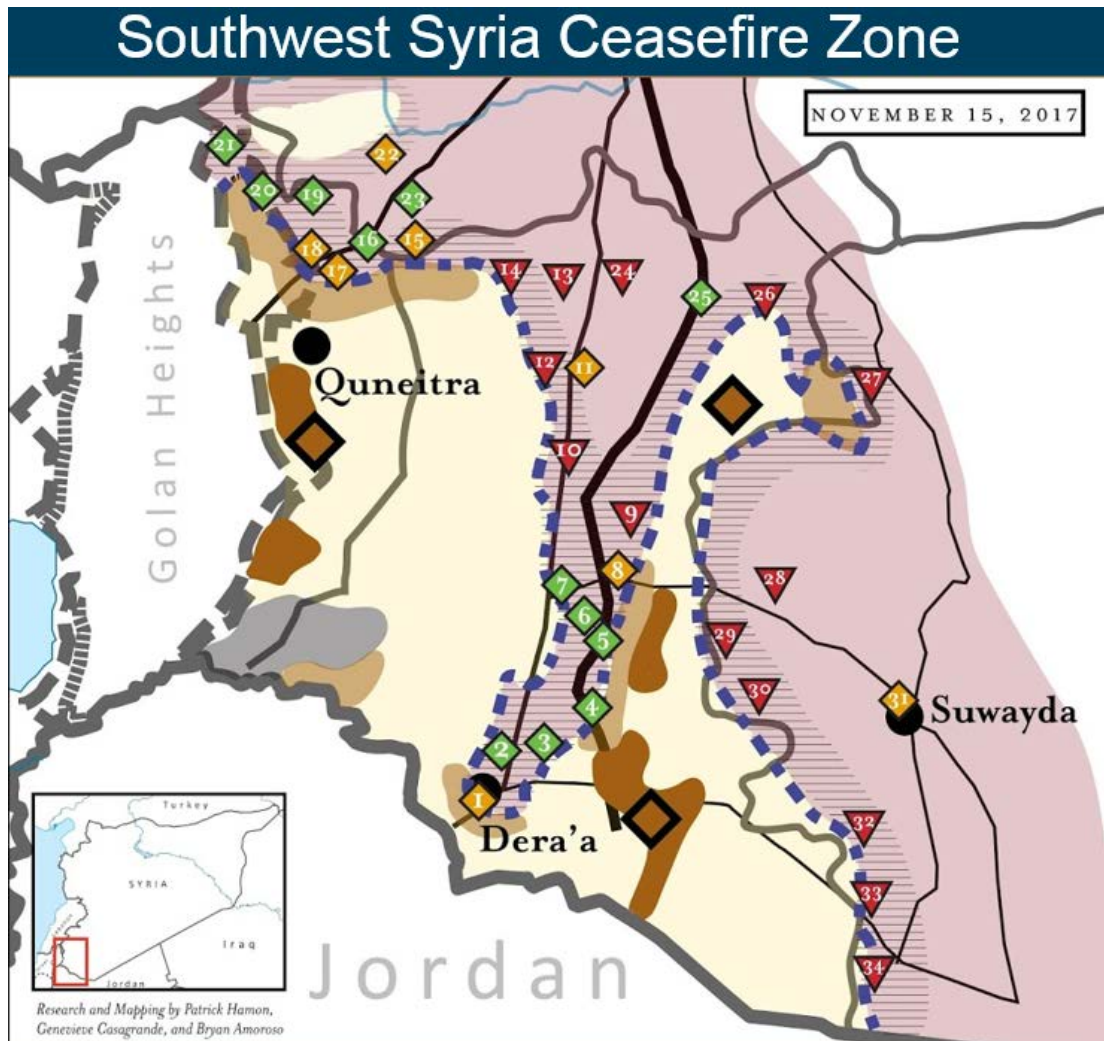
Meanwhile, the Syrian Civil War is increasingly linked to a number of intractable regional conflicts

- Turkey vs the Syrian Kurdish PYD
- Israel and Saudi Arabia vs Iran
- US Anti-ISIS Coalition vs Iran and Russia

This intersection of regional and local conflicts has been true throughout the war, but it is coming to the forefront now. First, Turkey has intensified its conflict with the Syrian Kurdish PYD (which they consider to be an offshoot of the PKK) in Northern Syria. Turkey has deprioritized its fight against Assad (which had already taken a backseat) and instead refocused on generating instability in areas held by the YPG in Northern Syria. Turkey has likely mounted active efforts to set up and support insurgent groups carrying out assassinations and roadside bomb attacks targeting the YPG in Manbij. Turkey also launched an intervention into the majority-Kurdish Afrin Canton in January 2018 to further prosecute its war against the YPG. Second, the growing regional instability between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel is to some extent driving further instability in the Syrian Civil War, particularly in southern Syria. The conflict also raises the prospect of greater escalation that ultimately involves the U.S. So all of these regional conflicts and dynamics, along with the continued consolidation of Assad and AQ, form key trends in the conflict that indicate that we are not moving toward a post-war phase. We are likely to see a mosaic of fractionalised conflicts across the country – a patchwork of ceasefires, de-escalation zones, and active frontlines that generates long-term instability in the country. This phase could last for the next two years or more. The UN Geneva Process right now is not in a position to deliver a wider national peace and none of these developments portend success in negotiations to end the Syrian Civil War. We are no closer to a meaningful peace but rather a new phase of conflict that remains unstable.

1.2 Local De-Escalation Zones / Administrations

1.2.1 Southern Syria Ceasefire Zone



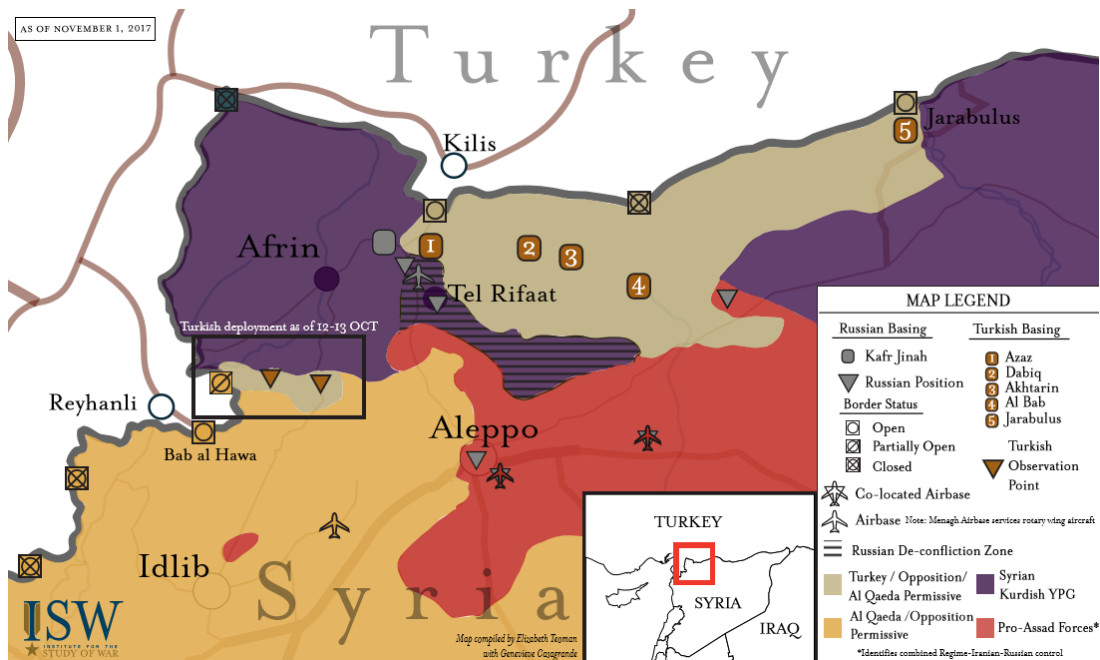
Southern Syria is held up as a model for de-escalation zones because it has been, by and large, the most effective ceasefire on the ground. The U.S., Russia, and Jordan brokered the Southern Syria Ceasefire Zone on July 9, 2017. On the surface, the deal appears to be largely a success story. Violence – although still ongoing – has decreased significantly. Services are provided by local councils supported by Free Dera'a Provincial Council as well as opposition-led structures such as Dar al-Adal Courthouse. It has on the surface reduced violence to a great extent, although continued ceasefire violations remain ongoing, particularly in certain parts of Quneitra Province and near Deraa City. The return of 6,500 individuals to Dera'a Province from Jordan in July – September 2017 shows that people are tentatively starting to buy into the idea that there might be a more lengthy peace on the ground. The opposition provincial council has reported that 15% of residents in Dera'a Province have started to rebuild or repair their homes in opposition-held regions. Despite all this, southern Syria is not necessarily safe.

The deal fails to constrain Iran and al Qaeda despite the decreased violence in Southwest Syria, which ultimately positions the region for some future instability and risk. Iran continues to consolidate a long-term presence in Syria along the Golan Heights, which has been a long-standing Iranian objective. Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah have worked to build human and

military infrastructure in southern Syria. The U.S., Russia, and Jordan agreed upon a Memorandum of Principles for Southern Syria on November 8. The deal includes an “exclusionary zone” that requires foreign forces – including Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah - to depart from a five-to-seven kilometer buffer zone along the agreed-upon line of contact. Iran left behind friendly local paramilitary groups and a small number of foreign fighters to continue to cultivate and recruit local groups not covered by the exclusion zone but ultimately subordinate to Iran. Iran and Hezbollah are continuing their overt build-up on the outskirts of this zone as well as a covert ‘underground’ build-up within it. This buildup places Iran and its proxies less than a one hour drive from the Golan Heights and Israel which will ultimately generate potential future conflict along the Golan Heights. The ostensible reason for generating all this infrastructure is to create a third front for Iran and Hezbollah to pressure Israel on the Golan Heights. Iran continues to consolidate its presence along the Golan Heights through a network of proxy forces while retaining significant positions in Southern Syria.

AQ has also leveraged the ceasefire to deepen its presence along the Syrian-Jordanian border. In May 2017, we received reports that AQ dispatched roughly 30 senior commanders from Idlib Province to Dera’a Province in southern Syria. Their reported mission was to replicate their success at transforming the opposition in Idlib Province in Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces. This influx of leadership comes at a time when the southern opposition is relatively fraught and facing an uncertain future. For instance, the Trump Administration recently issued orders to suspend all covert assistance to the opposition, which includes certain anti-regime groups in southern Syria. Thus, in December 2017, many of these groups are going to see their funding for salaries, weapons, and equipment reduced almost to nothing. This hit also comes at a time when the opposition is struggling to enforce security and governance in the south. The opposition Free Dera’a Provincial Council, which is the overarching council that directs aid and resources to other local councils on the ground, has suffered a shortfall of funding. The primary judicial institution in the opposition-held south – the Dar al-Adal Courthouse - also is facing a major resource cut and had to go on a week-long work stoppage in October 2017 after a jailbreak. The courthouse relies on armed opposition groups to provide security and enforce its decisions – as opposition resources decline, the prospect of enforcing governance in this environment also decreases. Into this environment, AQ has inserted a number of commanders to stir up the pot. AQ is positioning itself to fill the governance and military vacuum. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the AQ affiliate in Syria, launched an offensive in northern Quneitra Province that marked one of the first major opposition-led operations against the regime in southern Syria since the implementation of the de-escalation zone in mid-2017. Al-Qaeda will likely intensify its attempts to coopt dissatisfied opposition fighters who aren’t receiving salaries and redirect them to break apart the de-escalation zone in the coming months. AQ likely also directed a recent wave of forty-two attempted assassinations to shape the leadership of the opposition in southern Syria that began on August 7, 2017, killing over eleven ranking anti-regime opposition commanders and governance officials. More than half of the attempts targeted former or current U.S.-backed opposition groups. There is a clear effort to destabilize and transform the opposition, transform southern Syria into a safe haven for AQ, and potentially reignite the fighting in the south. I don’t want to create the impression that the the descalation zone is already breaking down or that the south is a heavily penetrated by AQ - the FSA still dominates the region - but this is a worrying long-term trend for the de-escalation zone and stability in southern Syria.

1.2.2 Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) Zone

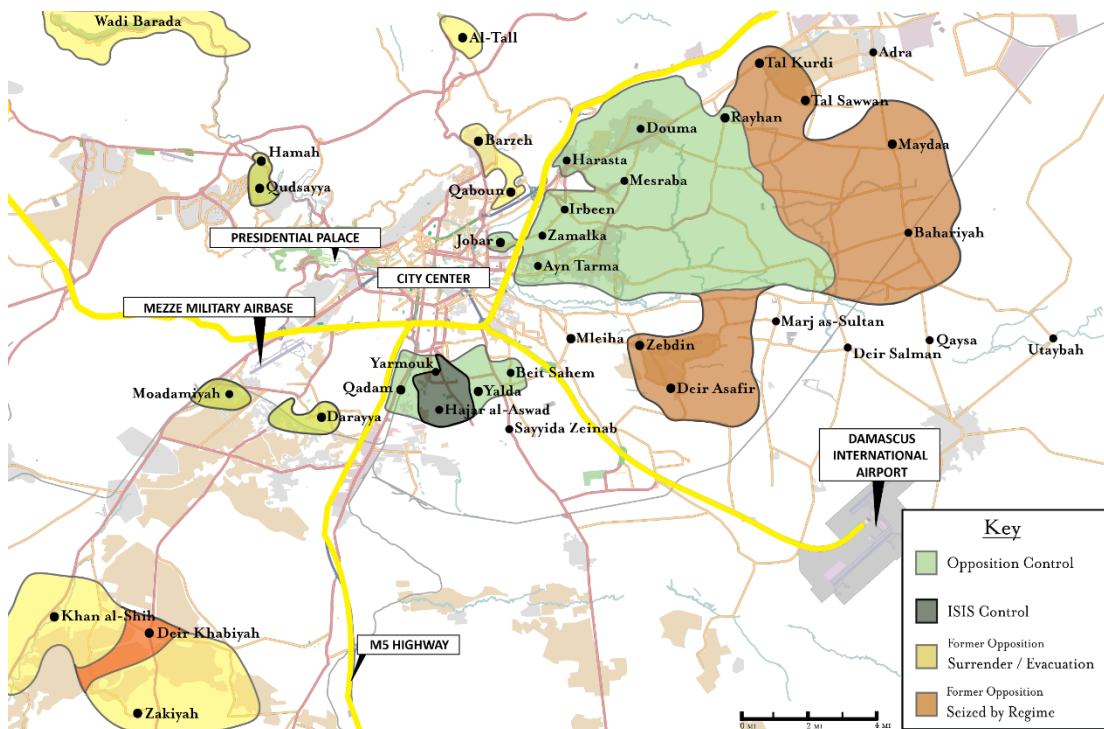


One of the other zones held up as a model is the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone - the buffer region carved out by Turkey in northern Syria to function as a defacto safe zone. This area has seen major investment by Turkey to create both a safe zone and a base of operations for the Turkish Armed Forces that stretches from Azaz to Jarabulus. Turkey is actively working to establish a de-facto 'safe zone' / buffer zone in Northern Aleppo Province by restoring utilities and services, including funding for infrastructure, hospitals, schools, and mosques supported by the relevant ministries of the Government of Turkey. Turkey has even connected border towns to its own electrical grid and water system. It has promoted transborder trade through the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which is the recognized opposition government based in Turkey. Turkey has worked very hard to establish credible local governance and reform the armed opposition inside of this zone on the Syrian-Turkish Border. Turkey trained 5,000 Free Syrian Police in Northern Aleppo Province. Turkey is also consolidating armed opposition factions into three 'corps' under the 'National Army' of the SIG Ministry of Defense. These 'corps' are responsive to the SIG and Turkey. They have transferred their camps to the SIG to serve as training academies and even relocated their bases outside of civilian urban areas.

Northern Aleppo Province remains under the *de-facto* protection of Turkey – but not entirely safe. There are frequent clashes / infighting between opposition groups in Northern Aleppo Province. Most recent clashes have been sparked by deal to transfer border crossings to SIG. The area is penetrated by Ahrar al-Sham and (likely) Al-Qaeda. Conditions remain poor for civilians in Al-Bab and nearby IDP Camps with reports of typhoid outbreaks and lack of basic services. There are even reports of IDPs who relocate from Raqqa City to the Euphrates Shield Zone but later return to Raqqa City due to the bad living conditions in the Euphrates Shield Zone. Turkey also, of course, intends to use this zone to leverage its position against the Syrian YPG in the majority-Kurdish Afrin Canton as well as Manbij. We see constant skirmishing, cross-line shelling, and the possibility of more coordinated military actions against the YPG by opposition groups backed by Turkey. Turkey for example leveraged the National Army to lead its offensive into Afrin Canton under Operation Olive Branch in January 2018. The risk of violence persists even though the zone has been stabilized to an extent that many other areas have not due to of the unique footprint of Turkey in Northern Aleppo Province.

1.2.3 Damascus Local Ceasefire Deals

Damascus has witnessed a major transformation over the past year-and-a-half. The map below depicts control of terrain in Damascus. The areas in yellow are opposition-held suburbs that have reached reconciliation and forced relocation deals with the pro-regime coalition. The areas in red/brown in Eastern Ghouta are opposition-held regions that pro-regime forces have seized over the past eighteen months in military operations against the opposition. Now for a broad overview of the security situation in Damascus. Eastern Ghouta - which is the large agricultural region east of Damascus - remains under a punishing siege-and-starve campaign that has only gotten worse over the past six months. Pro-regime forces seized the suburban towns of Barzeh and Qaboun in northern Damascus west of the M5 Highway (see the yellow mark west of the large green area) following operations launched in May 2017. Those districts were the launch point for a number of tunnels and smuggling routes that provided medical supplies, food, ammunition, weapons to armed opposition groups fighting in Eastern Ghouta.



Since May 2017, conditions have exponentially worsened inside of Eastern Ghouta due to the closure of these smuggling routes - which is of course what the pro-regime coalition intended to accomplish through its operations in that area. Eastern Ghouta remains under a punishing siege campaign despite an alleged 'de-escalation' deal brokered by Russia and Egypt in Eastern Ghouta in July 2017. The deal lacked buy-in from both regime and armed opposition groups on the ground. It was drafted in Egypt and relied upon Russia to uphold the regime's end of the deal as well as the political opposition to enforce conditions on the armed opposition - neither of which proved sufficient to prevent violence. Eastern Ghouta remains under a tight siege that prevents the delivery of food, medicine, and other essential supplies. We have also seen an intensified pro-regime military campaign inside of Eastern Ghouta.

To understand what is really happening inside Eastern Ghouta, I will take a step back and explain its internal dynamics. Eastern Ghouta is split between two primary opposition factions: Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman. Jaysh al-Islam holds influence primarily in Douma, which is the northern-most and largest town in Eastern Ghouta, as well as the rural areas of the pocket. Faylaq al-Rahman controls the more dense urban suburbs - Ayn Terma,

Zamalka, Arbin, and Harasta – along the M5 Highway. These two groups have struggled for political control over the opposition institutions inside Eastern Ghouta. This rivalry has intensified to such an extent that it rendered them ineffective, with both groups engaging in regular rounds of infighting that have killed hundreds of opposition fighters, destroyed medical supplies and food warehouses, eliminated free transit through the establishment of checkpoints through eastern Ghouta, and directly impacted civilians through widespread violence. These waves of infighting followed by reconciliation have generated tremendous uncertainty and instability inside Eastern Ghouta. The regime is focused on exploiting this tension. Under the latest iteration of the de-escalation zone, the primary areas of calm have been the areas controlled by Jaysh al-Islam. Jaysh al-Islam has reportedly cut a direct deal with the regime to participate in this de-escalation zone, unlike Faylaq al-Rahman. The primary violence has therefore focused on the areas held by Faylaq al-Rahman such as the Jobar District (the only opposition-held district inside Damascus City proper) as well as Ayn Terma and other districts held by the group along that densely-populated urban stretch. Eastern Ghouta, despite the claims of being a de-escalation zone, is actually what we would deem a very ‘hot’ frontline.

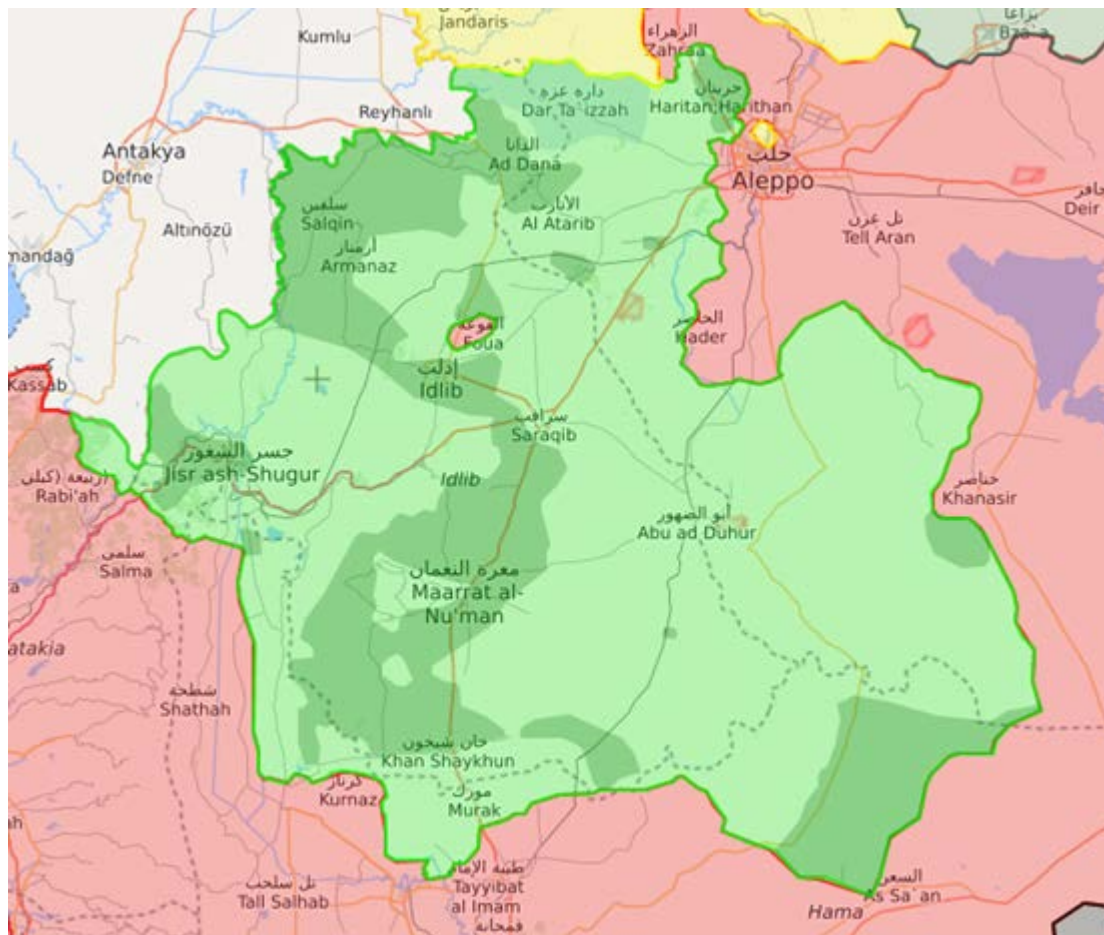
Damascus Suburbs ‘Reconciliation’

The regime likely intends to divide and conquer its remaining opponents in Damascus. The regime has succeeded in forcing reconciliation deals on most of the opposition-held suburbs in southern, western, and northern Damascus since May 2016. These gains are the culmination of the regime’s ‘siege-and-starve’ campaign, which has been ongoing for years, to isolate these districts, cut off food and other supplies, and limit public access in order to force negotiated surrenders of the population. This is exactly what happened. All of these deals followed a very similar pattern: the evacuation of fighters and civilians, the end of the siege, the restoration of municipal services, and amnesty for residents who remain behind. Thousands of armed opposition fighters and civilians have been evacuated to Idlib Province or allowed to stay in place under ostensible amnesty. Locals were given a choice – relocate to northern Syria away from your homes or stay under some form of amnesty. These deals have not necessarily been honoured by the regime. In fact, in most cases, the regime is failing to honour many of the critical terms of these amnesty and reconciliation deals.

Let’s take a case study of the town of Al Tal (north of Damascus). In late 2016, Al Tal agreed to a reconciliation deal and 2,000 to 3,000 people relocated out of town. The remaining residents were promised an end to the siege and a six-month amnesty period to regularise their status if they were draft dodgers or deserters. They could then serve in a paramilitary ‘home guard’ inside Al Tal, rather than face deployment elsewhere under the SAA. Almost immediately after the evacuation, however, the regime began to renege on this deal. The regime, within a month, began the active and indiscriminate forced conscription of residents – they targeted military-age males but also reservists and those who had already completed their military service prior to the Syrian Civil War. Opposition activist sources stated that 10 to 20 individuals per week would be taken away for conscription. The deal for a six-month amnesty never really came to fruition. In fact, many of these conscripts were also sent to frontlines rather than retained as a home guard. The regime has not honoured many aspects of the deal in Al Tal. In fact, in many of these opposition-held suburbs that have agreed to ceasefire deals, we see a lot of similar reports of ongoing conscription and failures to honour the deals, as well as continued limitations on access through pro-regime checkpoints on the outskirts of the towns despite agreements to lift the heaviest aspects of the siege.

1.2.4 Greater Idlib Province

The last aspect I want to touch upon is Greater Idlib province - the question of Syrian Rojava will be covered by Fabrice Balanche. For Idlib Province, I want to stress that - although it has recently been declared under a de-escalation zone at the Astana Talks – it represents a very special case. It is a special case because it has become the clearing ground where the regime has decided to deposit evacuated armed opposition fighters and opposition-supportive civilians from across the country. Evacuees from Damascus, Homs City, and the Syrian-Lebanese border have all been transferred to Idlib Province in various forms. The front lines in the province had been relatively quiet, despite the lack of a formal de-escalation zone enforcement mechanism. That quiet - and the relative lack of pro-regime airstrikes - was primarily due to the fact that HTS had been busy consolidating its control inside Idlib Province. HTS had been directed inwards against rival factions and opposition governance institutions with the aim to consolidate and declare an 'Emirate' inside of Idlib province. **Map of Idlib Province showing green 'opposition-held / AQ-penetrated territory' – November 2017:**



Map of Idlib by Liveuamap (<https://syria.liveuamap.com/>)

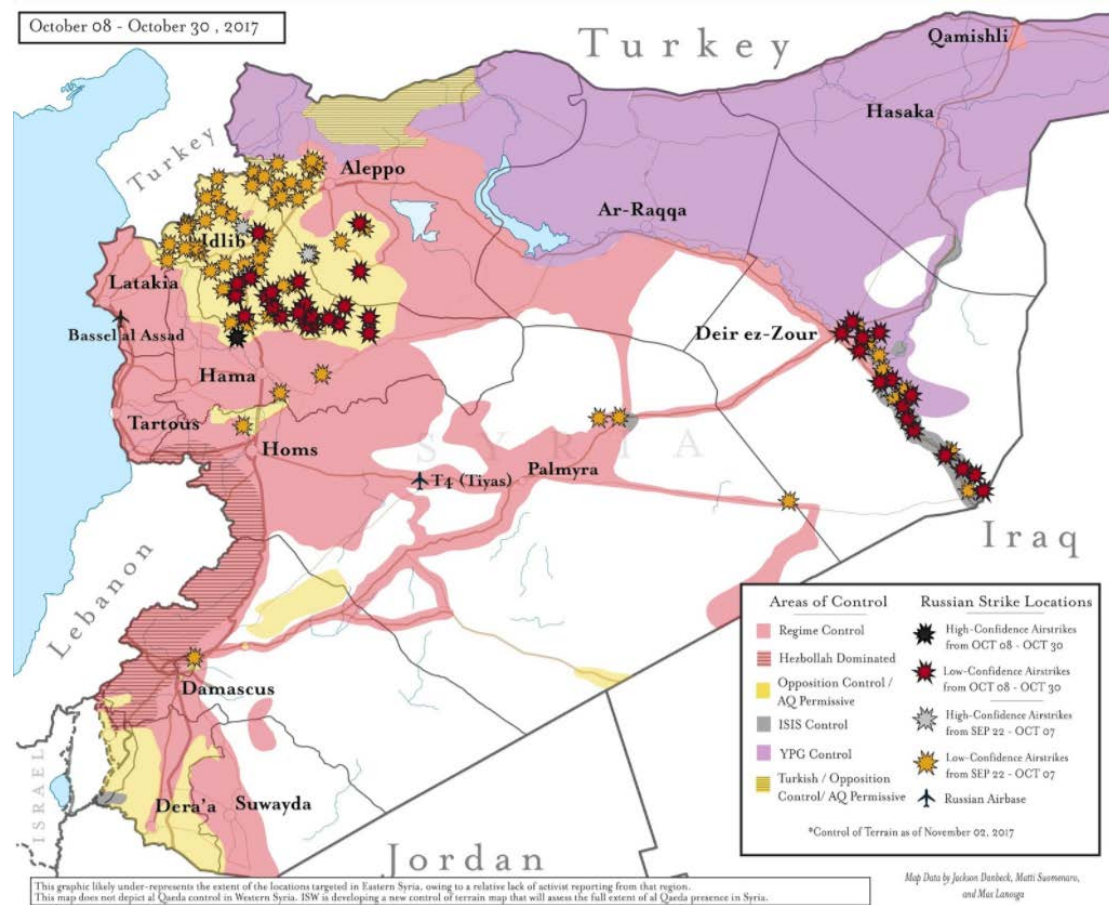
AQ has intensified its effort to consolidate military and political control over its Idlib Province 'Emirate'. We see this through a number of reflections – both in its violent campaigns against armed opposition groups but also in attempts to take over governance structures. We have seen, for example, HTS launch intensified attacks campaigns against potential rival opposition groups over the past year. We had a set of infighting between HTS and its ostensible 'partner' Salafi-Jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham in July 2017 that resulted in HTS seizing the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian-Turkish border as well as large number of towns along the border (Armanaz, Salqin, etc.). More recently, in November 2017, HTS clashed with Islamist group Harakat Nour al-Deen al-Zenki (HNDZ) in western Aleppo Province (directly west of

Aleppo City) as part of its continued campaign to knock out rival groups. HNDZ had formerly been a member of HTS but also formerly received covert support from the U.S. Its loyalties remains suspected. HNDZ was thus the latest number to be drawn as HTS moves to consolidate and eliminate its rivals.

HTS has also been competing against the secular civil council infrastructure in Idlib Province. The Province basically has two rival systems of governance: one is a series of dozens of local councils that are supported by the Syrian Interim Government inside of Turkey, as well as foreign aid organisations and NGOs that are coordinated to some degree by the Free Idlib Provincial Council. Similarly to southern Syria, there is a network of local councils, local technocrats, and local powers who distribute resources and hold the necessary credibility with the international organisations to receive and redistribute aid through the overarching provincial council. That said, the influence of the overarching provincial council really only comes into play to the degree to which they it is trusted as a venue through which to work with local councils providing services on the ground. HTS has been busy building alternate sources of governance and influence – particularly a system of *sharia* courts and local security apparatus that enforce its judicial rulings on the ground and that serve as *de facto* police forces that rival the Free Idlib Police supported by the SIG. HTS has taken active measures against rival governance institutions. For example, HTS seized the Idlib City Council - a civilian-led, externally-funded, opposition administration – in August 2017. HTS has repeatedly seized control of local service provision agencies to consolidate them under its own HTS Civil Administration of Services. In late October/early November 2017, HTS formed the ‘National Salvation Government’ (SSG) in Idlib Province as a counter-point to the SIG. Whereas the SIG is based in Turkey and funnels resources to local councils, this SSG is based in Syria and backed by armed opposition groups, particularly HTS. It draws upon the *sharia* court system as well as from armed enforcement mechanisms of those courts. HTS is attempting to coopt local councils into this network. As the struggle between these two rival governments plays out, you see the increasing unwillingness of some foreign benefactors to support opposition councils and opposition groups in northern Syria due to their perceived infiltration by AQ. This paradoxically drives the cycle further – as foreign donors back away from local council structures, fearing infiltration by AQ, it weakens the local councils further and provides greater opportunity for AQ to continue coopting governance structures in Northern Syria.

HTS is attempting to undermine the de-escalation zone with pro-regime forces in Idlib Province. Over the past two months (October - November 2017), we have seen a resumption of violence in Idlib Province. This is our latest Russian airstrikes map – and as you can see, airstrikes have resumed in Idlib Province beginning in September 2017 when HTS led an opposition offensive against pro-regime forces in northern Hama Province. ISIS also invaded opposition-held eastern Hama Province in October 2017. These events generated a whole set of turbulence that led to the resumption of pro-regime air raids across Idlib Province, which had been relatively quiet for quite some time. We had even witnessed the start of some limited returns – roughly 10 to 15,000 individuals - from Turkey to Idlib Province because of the stoppage of airstrikes. The airstrikes have now resumed but the Syrian-Turkish border remains closed. Most of those returnees, unfortunately, are now trapped in Idlib Province without an option to exit Syria. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of civilians have been relocated and transferred into this zone by the regime. So the population is becoming more dense, the IDP concentration is becoming more dense, as the conflict moves on. But Idlib Province is also positioned to be the zone where, in my assessment, the regime intends to fight one of the last battles of the Syrian Civil War. I can see a future where the regime reaches a reconciliation agreement with Deraa Province and the opposition Southern Front. Not so in

Idlib Province. Greater Idlib Province is likely going to be the next major humanitarian catastrophe coming up in Syria.



1.3 Future of Syria as a Functional State?

The current trendlines are not moving toward a unified or coherent nationwide peace agreement across the country but rather a mosaic of local peaces that are enforced to different degrees and for different time periods. These peaces will not be consistent or uniform. We will thus see a Syria that remains divided and unstable for quite some time at the mercy of overlapping and rival administrations – those of the regime, or Rojava, or Turkey in the Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) Zone, or various other armed actors. Opposition governance structures also compete with one another as much as the regime administration, which actually maintains influence within many opposition-held regions. This local governance – the local break down of control within the state itself - also contributes to this trend of decentralisation inside Syria that will be very difficult to reverse. Over the next year, I anticipate that the pro-regime coalition will likely attempt to reconcile with some local administrations and factions (such as the Southern Front or the Syrian Kurds) while crushing others (such as Eastern Ghouta or Idlib Province). The Syrian Kurds are actively being enticed back into the fold by the Russians. The success of this effort would thereby return a third of the country to the embrace of the regime. The regime thus has a unique relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces in that regard. In southern Syria, I suspect that the current conditions - particularly the lack of funding from foreign backers such as Jordan - are primed for some kind of wider reconciliation deal between the opposition and the regime. Such a deal would not prohibit the long-term problems that I mentioned earlier, including the prospect of an AQ-led attempt to break any such reconciliation deal as well as the likelihood that the regime would not reliably uphold the reconciliation. These regime has thus far operated in a half-hearted manner that serves its own interests to date. However, I expect more to see violence in Damascus and Idlib Province. So these areas are going to be perennially violent. In Eastern Ghouta, for example, the regime will likely pursue either the complete evacuation of the zone or a complete military victory. Damascus has been a long-standing priority for the regime to clear of opposition forces. Similarly, Idlib Province, as I noted – the conditions are being set for the regime to redirect resources back west toward Idlib Province, after it feels that it has sufficiently secured its position in eastern Syria. The regime will then challenge HTS for control of northern Syria. Syria is not set to be reunited in the near-future by either military arms or political negotiations but rather to continue as an unstable and dangerous conflict that threatens for civilians across the country.

2. Pro-Assad forces (C. Kozak, ISW)

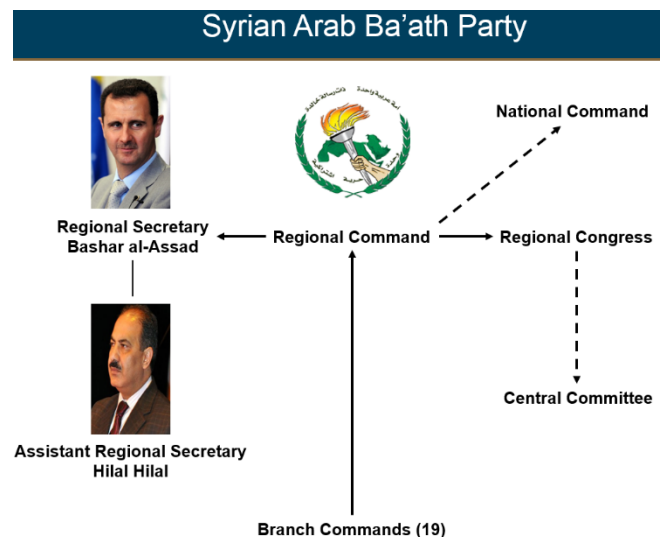
Syrian Regime Structures

- Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party
- Syrian Intelligence Services
- Syrian Arab Army (SAA)
- Structure
- Conscription and Protected Populations
- Pro-Regime Paramilitaries
- National Defense Forces (NDF) and Other Paramilitaries
- Recruitment and Incentive Structures
- Russian and Iranian Initiatives
- Pro-Regime Foreign Forces
- Iran's Hybrid Expeditionary Force
- Pro-Regime Coalition Command Structures

2.1 Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party

The Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party has:

- 19 branch commands: 13 provincial commands, 2 commands in Damascus and Aleppo City, and 4 university commands. They report to the regional command.
- Hilal Hilal is the Assistant Regional Secretary. He was promoted from the Aleppo Province Branch Command in 2013 due to his role organising the 'Ba'ath Brigades'



The Ba'ath Brigades are a political militia organised through the Baath Party. It originated in the Sunni merchant class in Aleppo City, but the model was exported to other places such as Damascus and Homs City. For that effort, Hilal Hilal was promoted to head countrywide Ba'ath Party operations in 2013. Currently, as the regime is trying to push the conflict towards what it is optimistically terming a 'post-war' phase, it is working on reforming the Ba'ath Party. We have seen numerous branch commanders replaced, particularly in Aleppo City

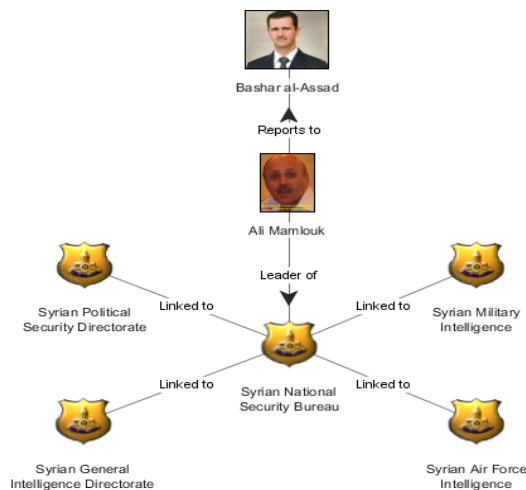
and Aleppo Province. We have seen further such 'churn' as the regime tries to re-establish the traditional pre-war networks of patronage through the Baath Party. The regime has appointed new branch commanders, rebuilt networks of government functionaries through the Ba'ath Party, reappointed low-ranked officials to new positions, and rolled back a bit of the fragmentation and decentralisation that has occurred over the past six years of warfare.

2.2 Syrian Intelligence Services

There are four primary intelligence organisations that were created to observe each other, as well as the populace:

- Military Intelligence Directorate
- Political Security Directorate
- Air Force Intelligence Directorate
- General (State) Security Directorate

The intelligence agencies are organised into branches on a provincial basis. Each agency has a central branch in Damascus as well as regional, city, and local branches across the country. In terms of command structure, all four of these organisations nominally report to the National Security Bureau which performs a function similar to the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, at least on paper. It is the one central clearing house that operates as the intermediary between the four organisations and Assad. But the day-to-day reality is that these four intelligence branches largely operate autonomously and often report directly up to the Office of the President. The National Security Bureau, headed by Ali Mamlouk, does hold a significant amount of sway over the four agencies and the wider security apparatus. The intelligence branches nonetheless do operate quite autonomously on a day-to-day basis.



The intelligence agencies are further organised into sub- branches, so you'll have Air Force Intelligence which will oversee a number of local branches based at local air bases, on a provincial basis, or on a city-wide basis. These are the branches through which the intelligence agencies have mobilised their support networks of informants and paid agents. For example, we do see indications in opposition-held regions of assassinations being conducted by pro-regime intelligence services. There has been a spate of 'rock IEDs' - basically custom manufactured plastic rocks with explosives - that bear some of the hallmarks of Syrian Intelligence. The agencies also participate in the mobilization of paramilitary groups – many of the intelligence organisations, particularly Air Force Intelligence, actually pay competitive salaries to raise their own paramilitary forces that protect the areas around their facilities and maintain a forward presence in other areas. You could see this very prominently in Aleppo City, where Air Force Intelligence basically operated its own militia in Western Aleppo City, but also in Homs City, Damascus, and other areas. These militias are paid salaries directly through the agency budget so that each intelligence organization can maintain a presence on

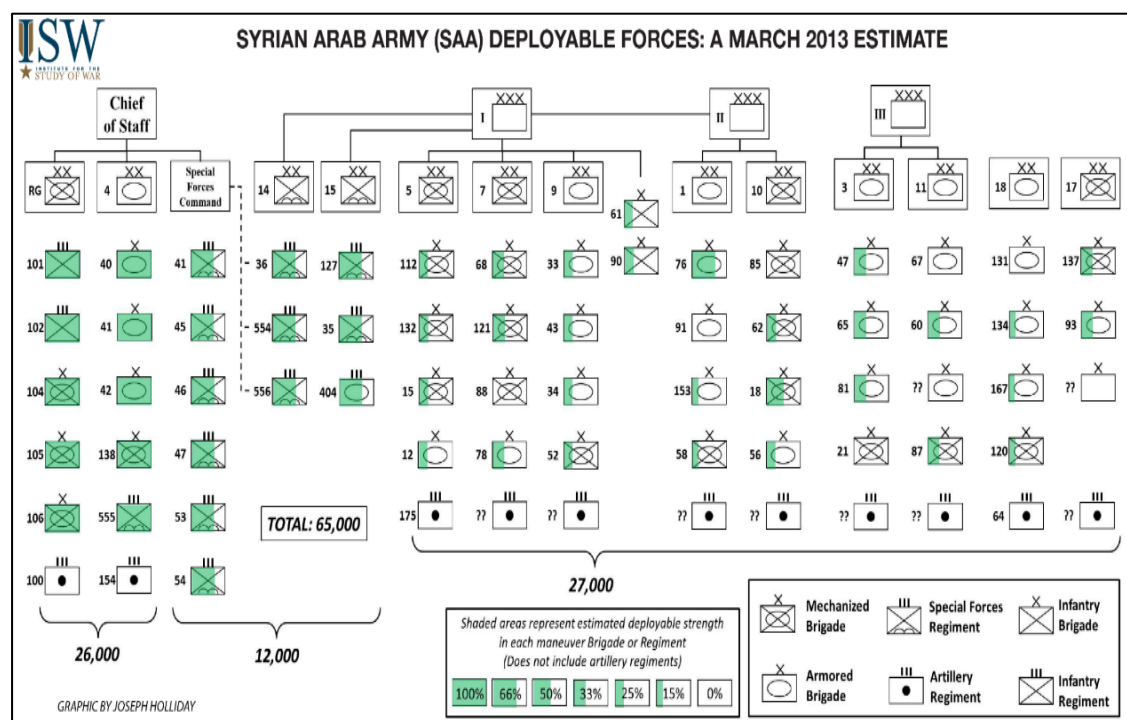
the ground. The Political Security and Military Intelligence Directorates organized similar militias in Dera'a Province in southern Syria. The former head of Political Security - Rustam Ghazali - was from Deraa Province, so his local patronage network of paramilitaries was led by intelligence commanders and facilitated through the agency branches. Of course, all four intelligence agencies are implicated in widespread abuses, Air Force Intelligence being among the most prominent. There is no clean intelligence agency in Syria. Most detainees are processed through one of the intelligence agencies in some way, shape, or form rather than directly through the police or judicial system. That's the general trend we have observed.

2.3 Syrian Arab Army (SAA)

Structure

The Syrian Arab Army no longer exists as a unified or coherent fighting force capable of independently securing the entire country. Its formal command structures and manpower have eroded during the civil war. Contributions from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia have closed the gap between the regime's requirements and capabilities of the SAA. This is a fractured and degraded force from the one on paper – there are not necessarily neat hierarchical lines to explain how units are organised and how operations occur on the ground. This coalition has major asymmetric advantages over opposition forces.

Three years of defections, desertions, and combat attrition have reportedly more than halved the combat strength of the Syrian Arab Army. The Syrian Arab Army likely consists of roughly 100,000 soldiers as of January 2017 – mainly ill-equipped and poorly-trained conscript soldiers. The manpower shortage is so dire that Assad found it necessary to come out and publically admit the situation in mid-2015. The Syrian Arab Army as of early 2013 could reliably deploy only a fraction of these forces in offensive operations – perhaps as few as 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers. (**Graphic: Syrian Arab Army (SAA) Deployable Forces: A March 2013 Estimate**).



These deployable forces stem largely from ‘elite’ units such as the Republican Guard, Special Forces, and Fourth Armoured Division that draw heavily from pro-regime minority populations including Syrian Alawites. The mobilization of paramilitary forces and foreign fighters by 2013 – including the National Defense Force, IRGC-Quds Force, and Lebanese Hezbollah - helped mitigate and reverse the operational immobility caused by the manpower shortage. The regime nevertheless suffered from further attrition as late as summer 2015, before the arrival of reinforcements from Iran and Russia. Some sources claim that the conflict has resulted in the death of as many as one-third of fighting age males among Syrian Alawites as of April 2015. The Syrian Arab Army operates under an increasingly decentralized and ad hoc network of command-and-control structures that grants expanded operational authority to junior officers in the field. These structures have been coopted by local strongmen as well as Iran and Russia. Two key points:

Firstly, The Syrian Arab Army operates under the ‘[qutaa system](#)’ first implemented by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in 1984. The system assigns each combat division to a specific geographical region/territory (e.g. in Dera’a Province – the 5th, 7th, 9th Divisions; 11th Brigade in Homs Province, etc.), gives it responsibility for local population centers, and grants wide discretionary powers to the commanding officer – units are very much wedded to their location. This transformed each operating areas into local fiefdoms from which commanders could extract resources. It also served basically to harden those regions against insurgency or revolution. If the commanding officer had a vested interest in retaining a patronage network inside his unit or geographical assignment, he would keep the system working and actively work to quell dissent. So where the qutaa system has been very well-established, such as Deraa Province, it generated a form a durability even among conscript-heavy units that contrasted with other areas where the qataa system was less entrenched. Pro-regime forces have demonstrated greater ability to hold regions dense with such sectors, particularly Dera’a and Damascus Provinces. The elite units are the only force that actively get redeployed around the country to different ‘hot’ fronts.

Secondly, the Syrian Arab Army had [task-organized](#) its maneuver units as low as the battalion level by 2013 in order to ensure their loyalty and improve their combat effectiveness. What task organisation means is that the regime will take a loyal (often elite) unit and break it up below the brigade level and embed it in a regular unit to act as enforcers. For example, the regime will assign one company from an elite unit to work with two companies from a conventional unit, forming a single battalion under the leadership of the elite unit. This boosts the combat capabilities of each individual unit in the field. Such a unit will often be reported as a battalion of elite forces in the media, but in actual fact it isn’t – it is a single small elite unit sitting on top of a larger base of regular SAA. The regime used task organization very early in the conflict – as early as 2012 – 2013 – as it became a civil war. This organisation continues to this day. For example, if try to find where the 105th Republican Guard Brigade was deployed in May 2012, you might find eight to ten locations because small chunks of the brigade had been embedded and redistributed across the entire country. This makes our jobs much more difficult in terms of figuring out which units were where at any one given time.

Both Iran and Russia have largely coopted the remaining command structure of the Syrian Arab Army as their combat troops have become the most asymmetric advantage in the conflict. Much decision-making by the regime is a negotiated process with Iran/Hezbollah and Russia – both at the strategic echelon and on the battlefield – in which Russia and Iran have an outsized influence on the final course of action.

- **Iran** reportedly assumed control of key operations rooms (ad hoc headquarters) in Latakia and Dera'a Provinces in 2015 through the use of force. Activist sources noted claims of executions or transfers of low-ranking regime officers away from the area if they had a problem working under Iran (especially in southern Syria).
- **Russia** took control over major operations in Northern Syria following its intervention in the Syrian Civil War in October 2015, including key fronts in Latakia and Aleppo Provinces. Its increasing influence can be witnessed in the ongoing changes to pro-regime campaign design, including the major cauldron battles.

Conscription and Protected Populations: The overall trend is that forced conscription practices have continued unabated if at a lower level than 2015. We continue to see raids and flying checkpoints for conscription in all major cities, particularly on the Syrian Coast and Damascus. We continue to see the conscription of populations that would otherwise be considered 'protected' – whether that is individuals that just shy of the military service age or individuals who have already completed military service. The regime clearly recognizes that it continues to have a manpower problem and thus conscription continues largely unabated. In terms of resistance, we have also seen the continued outflow of fighting-aged males from both regime-held and opposition-held areas due to fears about conscription, especially along the Syrian Coast. We also see continued conscription avoidance among the Syrian Druze population in Suwayda Province, which presents an interesting case. The Syrian Druze in Suwayda Province have reached an informal understanding with the regime that local residents will not be conscripted in Suwayda Province. Residents can volunteer for military service outside the province but they will not be conscripted by force. Residents instead volunteer to protect the province through local military factions rather than being deployed elsewhere. Every couple of months though, we will see attempts by the regime to conduct forced conscription in Suwayda Province that quickly meet with popular protest. There have been incidents of crowds swarming security buildings to break people out of jail and conscripts who flee to the homes of local Druze notables for protection. This dynamic is unique. The wider threat of conscription remains very valid and active for individuals in regime-held areas of Syria and will likely remain active for the foreseeable future.

2.4 Pro-Regime paramilitaries

- '*Shabiha*' / Popular Committees
- National Defense Forces (NDF)
 - Organization
 - Recent Developments
 - Other Paramilitaries
 - Mobilization Vectors
 - Russia and Iran
 - 5th Corps
 - ISIS Hunters

Assad organized a network of paramilitary auxiliaries to supplement his flagging combat forces on the battlefield. The regime and its allies quickly recognised that they needed to build an apparatus outside the traditional state military that could serve as an auxiliary force. One of the major successes of this strategy is that it has made this regime much more resilient because it appeals to populations that normally might flee or resist conscription – they have been able to tap into people's willingness to work homeguard service or local defence in their

own areas even if they are unwilling to conduct formal service under the SAA. These paramilitary groups have evaded regime efforts to impose state control and are instead loyal to foreign powers, political parties, criminal networks, or individual benefactors despite efforts to impose state control, further degrading regime command-and-control. These units closely coordinate with the remnants of the formal military, blurring the lines between official and unofficial combat forces.



Notable Pro-Regime Paramilitary Groups

| NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|
|  <p>60,000-100,000 strong Operates throughout Syria National umbrella organization for irregular pro-regime forces Receives training from IRGC-QF and Hezbollah Implicated in criminal activity Experiencing tensions with other pro-regime forces</p> | | | | |
| BA'ATH BATTALIONS  5,000-10,000 Aleppo, Idlib, Tartous, Homs, Damascus Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party led by Hilal Hilal SUNNI | WHIRLWIND EAGLES  "HUNDREDS" Homs, Damascus, Hama Syrian Socialist National Party led by Ali Haidar CHRISTIAN | POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF ISKANDERUN SYRIAN RESISTANCE  "HUNDREDS" Latakia, Idlib, Homs, Hama Marxist-Leninist led by Mirac Ural (aka Ali Kayali) ALAWITE | LIWA AL-QUDS AL-FILISTINI  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Aleppo Nayrab Refugees led by M. al-Sa'eed PALESTINIAN | PALESTINIAN LIBERATION ARMY  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Damascus, Dera'a Eastern Ghouta led by Maj. Gen. M. Tariq al-Khadraa PALESTINIAN |
| POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE GENERAL COMMAND (PFLP-GC)  ~1100 Damascus Yarmouk Refugees led by Ahmed Jibril PALESTINIAN | FATAH AL-INTIFADA  ~600 Damascus, Qalamoun Yarmouk Refugees led by Abu Hazim PALESTINIAN | JAYSH AL-WAFA NO SYMBOL "HUNDREDS" Damascus Eastern Ghouta RESIDENTS | SOOTORO  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Hasaka Syriac Unity Party ASSYRIAN CHRISTIAN | NATIONAL RESISTANCE IN HOURAN (HAMU)  UNKNOWN STRENGTH Dera'a poss. led by Rustom Ghazali QARFEH RESIDENTS |

At the start of the Syrian Civil War, minority populations and local communities organized themselves into 'popular committees' in order to defend their towns and neighborhoods against opposition forces. The regime also relied upon criminal networks of Syrian Alawites linked to the Assad Family - known as the '*shabiha*' - in order to break up protests. This term is thrown around a lot more in opposition publications than the *Shabiha* actually appear on the ground. The *shabiha* were state-supported criminal networks based mostly on the Syrian Coast that were mobilised through patronage networks to come to the streets and break up early protests. The name became a derogatory term to refer to forces involved in massacres on the Syrian Coast and ultimately as a blanket term to describe all paramilitary forces – but it is actually a very specific term for a specific force with its own local characteristics.

The regime took all of these groups, and took steps to consolidate these local militia groups under state control in early 2013 with the formation of the National Defense Forces (NDF) with assistance from Iran. At its peak the National Defense Forces represented most of the armed factions on the ground. It incorporated anywhere between 80,000 to 100,000 fighters during their peak in 2014 – 2015. The National Defense Forces largely focused on rear-area security and defense along static frontlines, freeing valuable manpower for other offensive operations taken on by the SAA. There were differentiations in pay scale – if you volunteered

on a checkpoint in your hometown, you received a low salary but if you volunteered for a defensive active frontline you received a pay bump, and if you were part of an offensive unit that actively fights alongside the SAA you would receive a further pay bump on top of that. The money to pay salaries is nonetheless often hard to come by in Syria – there have been a lot of reports highlighting the fragmentation of the NDF since 2015. The National Defense Forces have reportedly fragmented and reverted to local groups outside the formal command structure, generally due to economic turmoil that has hampered the regime's ability to pay competitive salaries vis-à-vis foreign or private actors. The formal umbrella structure of the National Defense Forces ostensibly remains in place over all paramilitary groups. Nonetheless, some sources estimate that the structure retains only 30,000 fighters under its command. The National Defense Forces remain more coherent in certain geographic locations – particularly in Homs Province where they are led by an engineer linked to the Syrian Republican Guard.

Paramilitary groups that do remain are linked to a wide variety of benefactors and causes who fight alongside the regime, generating friction in attempts to impose command-and-control:

- **Political Party Militias (Ostensibly under the Ministry of Defence)**
 - The Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party established the Ba'ath Brigades in Aleppo City in 2012, raising thousands of pro-regime fighters from Western Aleppo City. The Ba'ath Brigades later spread to other regions including Damascus and Homs Province.
 - The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) also operates a standalone militia called the 'Whirlwind Eagles' that draws heavily from minorities including Christians and Druze in Homs and Suwayda Provinces, and Damascus.
- **Palestinian militias**
 - Palestinians are subject to conscription although there are some unique aspects to their service under the 'letter of law' depending on when you or your family departed from Palestine into Syria and your current refugee status. Most Palestinians are subject to conscription in some form – either in the regular SAA or the affiliated Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) which is mostly active in Damascus. Other factions of Palestinians such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) also operate alongside pro-regime forces in Damascus.
 - There are also several Palestinian militias organised outside of formal structures. For example, the Palestinian Liwa al-Quds al-Filistini operates in Aleppo City. The group stems from historic refugee camps in Aleppo City and originally served as a local self-defence group in the camps that was then coopted under the state structures. We have now seen them deployed as far as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor Provinces. These militias also operate in a 'grey space' in which they are ostensibly part of the regime security apparatus and - just like other paramilitaries - receive ID cards from the Syrian Ministry of Defence, usually unique to their unit. But they also retain a lot of autonomy over local security in their areas.
- **Militias Backed by Wealthy Businessmen**
 - Wealthy Syrian Alawites with close links to the regime fund a variety of paramilitary groups. For example, Suqour al-Sahara (Desert Hawks) was a former pro-regime militia funded by a businessman named Mohammad Jaber

in Latakia Province. It was disbanded earlier this year due to issues of lawlessness that resulted in a formal order from Assad to dissolve.

- Rami Makhlouf – the wealthiest man in the country and a relative of President Assad – funds a variety of paramilitary groups through his Al-Bostan Committee. These are local self-defence forces funded by his family.

These forces build redundancy for the regime but sometimes lack cohesion and the capabilities necessary to operate independently against a sustained offensive. They often cannot be trusted to garrison an area without support from other units, irrespective of their deployment location. For example, several hundred paramilitary fighters proved insufficient to defend Palmyra against ISIS in December 2016 following the withdrawal of most combat forces from the region by Iran and Russia.

The other problem is that the fragmentation of command authority among paramilitary groups has granted the regime resiliency against immediate collapse at the cost of receding state sovereignty. These groups are jostling for resources locally – this leads to problems:

- Paramilitary groups reportedly engage in a wide range of criminal activity in order to exploit local populations and bolster their incomes: extortion at checkpoints, extortion of shop keepers, smuggling, etc.
- At times, paramilitary groups have engaged in direct confrontations with state authorities. Local sources report that the regime cannot execute arrest warrants on several wanted paramilitary leaders for fear of sparking armed clashes.

2.5 Pro-regime foreign intervention

Timeline of Foreign Pro-Regime Involvement

- 2011: Iran begins Advisory Mission to Syria with Lebanese Hezbollah
- 2012: Iran begins assembling paramilitary groups into the National Defense Forces
Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a Militias intervene in the conflict
- 2013: Lebanese Hezbollah intervenes in the conflict with the Battle of Qusayr
- 2014: Iranian-backed Afghan Shi'a Militias intervene in the conflict
- 2015: Russia intervenes in the conflict in conjunction with Iranian Ground Forces

Iran

Iran has played an integral role in the development of pro-regime paramilitary groups along the model of the Iranian Basij. Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah reportedly provide training, funding, and leadership to a wide variety of paramilitary groups ostensibly under regime authority. Iran likely desires to build the long-term infrastructure of a 'Syrian Hezbollah' to guarantee its influence in the country regardless of the outcome of the Syrian Civil War.

- Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah played a key role in the formalization of the National Defense Forces along the model of the Iranian 'Basij'. Recruits to the National Defense Forces received training in urban guerilla warfare from Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah instructors at facilities inside Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. Most of their initial efforts in the Syrian Civil War were directed towards the funding, training, and advising of domestic and foreign paramilitary groups.

- Iran has overseen enlistment campaigns across the country – in some cases competing directly with the regime for new recruits. Iran provides these recruits with competitive salaries as well as military equipment. Iran may spend up to \$15 billion per year in support of the regime. This competition for buy-in and support happens outside of the state's control. Iran has been nurturing its pool of future manpower. We have seen a lot of outreach to traditional Twelver Shia areas (Fu'ah and Kefraya in Idlib Province, for example) and towns and villages in western Syria. Iran has also funded reconstruction in neighbourhoods in an attempt to bolster its support. Their eventual goal is to form a shadow state structure responsive to Iran inside of Syria.
- IRGC-GF Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani lauded the establishment of a so-called "Second Hezbollah" in Syria in a speech given in May 2014. Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah likely play a key role in the formation of increasing numbers of sectarian paramilitary organizations drawn from Syrian Shi'a. These groups – primarily concentrated in Central and Coastal Syria – often label themselves as "Hezbollah in Syria" while using the rhetoric of the Axis of Resistance.
- Iran also appears to be nurturing its pool of future manpower through religious outreach. For example, Iran provided funding to theology schools on the Syrian Coast as of early 2015 in order to strengthen religious identity among Syrian Alawites. Iran has also praised the establishment of youth groups meant to promote the "spirituality" and "revolutionary values" of Iran in Syria.

Russian Influence

Russia leveraged its intervention in the country in late 2015 in order to strengthen the formal structures of the regime military and security services. Russia provides the majority of its military aid including advanced weaponry and air support through the Syrian Arab Army. Russia is trying to reconsolidate paramilitary groups under state control via new headquarters and command structures, although these efforts have not yet proven successful. It has channeled a lot of its support toward rebuilding the authority of the central state.

- Russia provides advanced military support directly to the Syrian Arab Army. Russia provided elite units such as the Syrian 'Tiger Forces' and Syrian Republican Guard with advanced armored vehicles including T-90 Main Battle Tanks and BTR-82 Armored Personnel Carriers in 2015/2016.
- Russia coordinates closely with official state structures as its primary interlocutors with pro-regime forces. Russia has repeatedly emphasized its presence in the country as a bilateral agreement between two legitimate governments against terrorism.
- Russia reportedly played a key role in the establishment of the Fourth Storming Corps in October 2015 and the Fifth Storming Corps in November 2016. The Fifth Storming Corps has been much more successful than the Fourth. These new structures reportedly intend to help consolidate paramilitary groups back under state control with command-and-control support, funding, and equipment provided by Russia. Both formations have reportedly struggled to attract new recruits or demonstrate results on the battlefield despite their foreign backing. The extent of Russian influence cannot be overstated - Russian Lt. Gen. Valery Asapov (killed in action near Deir ez-Zour City in September 2017) allegedly led the Fifth Storming Corps – demonstrating the depth the unit's penetration of Russia despite its ostensible position under the

SAA. The Fifth Storming Corps appears to blend manpower from both the SAA and paramilitary elements. It has become one of the reliable units for the regime and has deployed to eastern Homs and Deir ez-Zor Provinces.

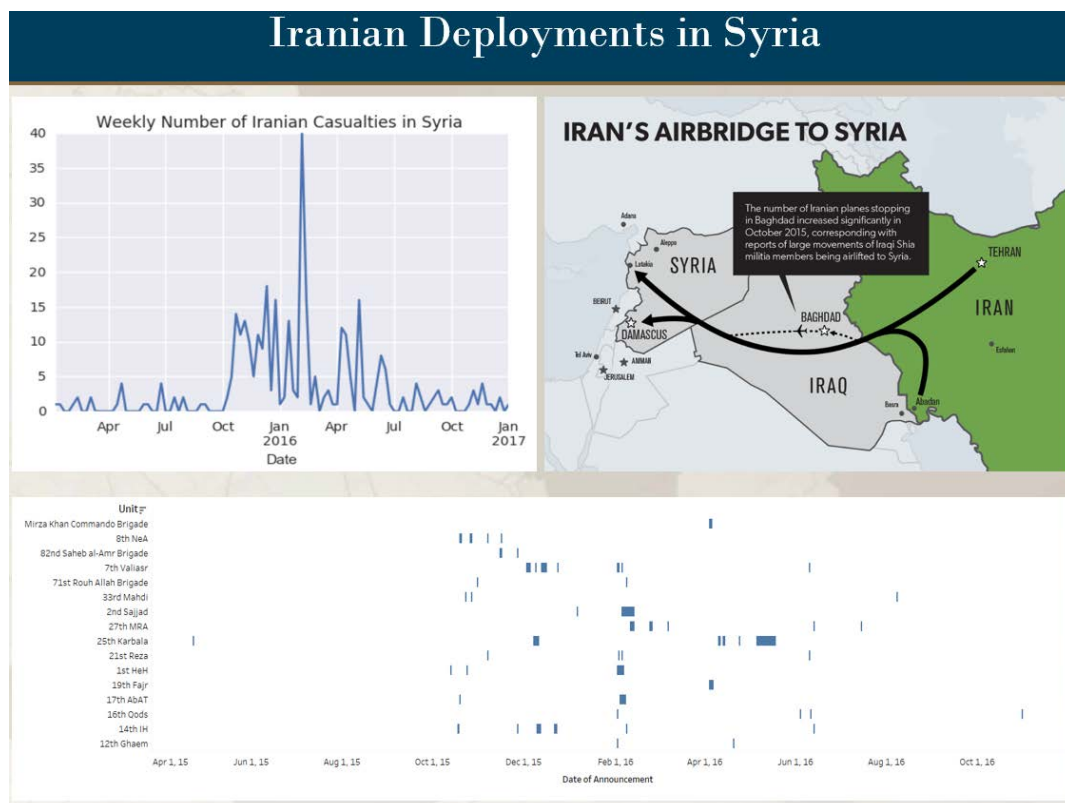
2.6 Pro-regime foreign fighters

- Pan-Shi'a Mobilization
 - IRGC, Pro-Regime Fighter Ratio
- Lebanese Hezbollah
- Iraqi Shi'a Militias
 - Harakat al-Nujaba
 - Kata'ib Hezbollah
 - Other Iraqi PMUs
- Afghan / Pakistani Shi'a: Liwa Fatimiyoun, Liwa Zeinabiyoun

As we look at the regional pan-Sunni mobilization that has brought foreign fighters to ISIS and Al-Qaeda, so too has there been an equally important pan-Shi'a mobilization directed and harnessed by Iran in Syria and the Middle East. Iran currently provides the high-end manpower capable of securing significant gains for pro-regime forces on the ground. Beyond the elite units, most active frontlines feature Iran and its proxies. Iran operates a coalition of tens of thousands of foreign fighters on the ground including members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a Militias, and Afghan Shi'a Fighters. These forces likely constitute one-eighth of total pro-regime forces – this ratio only increases when compared to the small number of combat-effective regime units. The foreign Iranian backed fighters might be one-third or one-quarter the combat-effective fighting forces available to the regime. There are efforts that Iran is willing to let the SAA lead but such offensives are always backfilled by the coalition of Iran and its proxy forces. This coalition of foreign forces sits underneath a hybrid command structure implemented by Iran. Iran has been very effective at bringing in and implanting foreign IRGC officers on top of a multinational / multiethnic mix of Hezbollah, Afghan Shia, and Iraqi Shia - and somehow get them to act effectively on the battlefield. Iran and its proxies maintain a countrywide presence but weight their deployments to frontlines as needed. There is a big presence of Iranian-backed forces in Aleppo City; most are now concentrated in eastern Syria, Deraa Province in southern Syria, and Damascus. These forces have a disproportionate role on the battlefield. They made up more than half – a disproportionate factor - of the pro-regime forces mustered to tip the balance during the battle of Aleppo City, for example:

- Iran has steadily increased its involvement in the Syrian Civil War as the regime came under mounting pressure – from law enforcement advisors (2011) to direct involvement of IRGC-Quds Forces military advisors (2012) to Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a Militias (2013)
- Iran currently maintains at least 7,000 of its own fighters – including elements of the IRGC-Ground Forces, IRGC – Basij Paramilitary, and 'Artesh' Special Forces – on the ground in the Syrian Civil War. This “whole of military approach” expands the ability of Iran to conduct independent military operations and maintain long-term force deployments in Syria. Iran also operates a coalition of roughly 15,000 – 20,000 foreign fighters, including 6,000-8,000 Lebanese Hezbollah Troops, 4,000-5,000 Iraqi Shi'a Militiamen, and 2,000-4,000 Afghan Shi'a Fighters – bringing the total size of the deployment backed by Iran to roughly 25,000 fighters. These totals do not include the Syrian Paramilitary Forces supported by Iran in Syria.

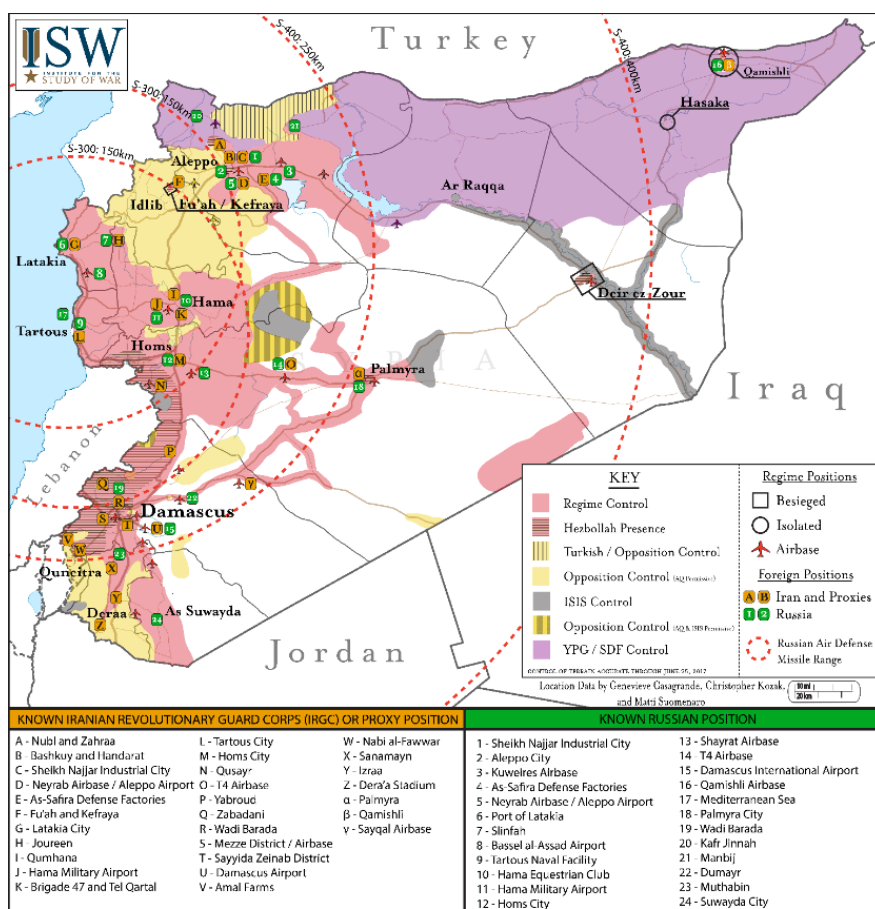
- Iranian Proxy Forces maintain a countrywide presence but remain largely concentrated in several locations – Damascus, Aleppo City, and the Syrian Golan Heights – that reflect their strategic priorities.
- Lebanese Hezbollah is the primary actor securing the Syrian-Lebanese Border, in line with its own strategic priorities to prevent regional spillover.
- Iranian Proxy Forces provide a disproportionate amount of the combat-capable infantry in major pro-regime operations. For example, Iraqi Shi'a Militias reportedly constituted more than half of the ten thousand fighters assembled for the year-long regime campaign to seize Aleppo City in 2015 - 2016. Iranian Proxy Forces also played key roles in the seizure of Palmyra in March 2016. As seen below in the graphs depicting the casualties of Iranian military advisors in Syria, their role most visible around the time of the Aleppo City and Palmyra campaigns. We can see that the overall hybrid coalition approach which has been used with great effect. We are witnessing a unique pan-Shia coalition that includes a range of nationalities.



Iran has developed a new model of coalition warfare through the implantation of leadership over a range of paramilitary groups that vary in nationality, ethnicity, and language group. Iran operates a sophisticated infrastructure to train, equip, manage, and redeploy these forces across the region in line with its strategic priorities. Iran could export this model of irregular hybrid warfare to other theaters of operation including Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

The IRGC has developed a model of cadre-warfare that allows Iran to implant military leadership over a base of irregular fighters that it organizes, funds, and equips in a host country. Iran deploys cadres of brigade officer corps with experienced non-commissioned officers to embed with regional forces on thirty-to-sixty day rotations. These rotations pull

from multiple different units to spread combat experience throughout the IRGC – Ground Forces. This style of combat comes at a cost of lives – including the death or injury of an entire cadre in Khan Touman south of Aleppo City in 2016 – but serves as a combat multiplier to the effectiveness of its proxy forces on the battlefield. Iran operates a sophisticated infrastructure to maintain its foreign proxy forces in Syria. Iran operates a major strategic airbridge using commercial aircraft that stretches from Tehran / Abadan to Damascus / Latakia via Baghdad. Iran also runs its own efforts to recruit, train, and equip thousands of Afghan and Pakistani Shi'a Fighters via the IRGC. The Afghan Shia Liwa Fatimioun is recruited through coercion and other leverage exerted by Iran on Hazara Afghans. There is a large Afghan refugee population in Iran that is pressed into service through various 'sticks' and some 'carrots'. Afghans who 'volunteer' to fight can receive residency papers; those who don't risk deportation. If you are arrested attempting to cross the border, you are offered the option to enlist or join a volunteer unit in Syria. If you die, you will receive a martyrdom payment for your family. These incentives – beyond volunteerism - often press Afghan Shia into service. Afghan Shia often take heavy casualties due to poor training and their deployment to areas with heavy fighting in Syria. The IRGC – Quds Force operates in tandem with Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria to provide leadership to other proxy forces. IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah often collocate on the battlefield with Hezbollah serving as combat trainers and field advisors overseen by Iranians. Iran adjusts the composition and deployment of its proxy forces in order to balance its regional strategic objectives. For example, Iran expanded to deployment of Lebanese Hezbollah and Afghan Shi'a Militias in Syria in mid-2014 in order to compensate for the withdrawal of Iraqi Shi'a Militias following the Fall of Mosul in June 2014. Iranian Proxy Forces also operate in close coordination with the Syrian Arab Army. The Syrian Arab Army often provides heavy support including artillery, armor, and airstrikes to infantry forces composed primarily of Iranian Proxy Forces (**Map: Known Iranian, Russian and Proxies' Positions**).



2.7 Locating specific units and identifying command structures

As noted, it is very difficult to track military units because, unlike traditional militaries where you have the deployment of a specific brigade to a specific location with a specific mission, we witness a task-organised force under a fractured command structure and a confused hierarchy that operates regular units in tandem with irregular and foreign forces. The command structure is not clear or crisp on the ground due to the many hybridized units that have been split, merged, or embedded atop others. The information available in open sources may not be that useful to establish where units were. Most of ISW's information on unit deployments are based on two sources: first, opposition reports of capturing ID cards that have a unit and recruitment area, division, officer signature; and second, interviews with defected officers. Those sources of information are now out of date, so it is difficult to establish an exact picture. The timing and location of deployments can be very difficult to establish in practice, with units subdivided and thus reported in multiple places at once. Tracking down unit deployments can be very time consuming. With regards to seniority, rank, and position – as I noted, with the decentralisation that is ongoing, local battlefield commanders hold a lot more sway. There is culpability for regime crimes at a very senior level – particularly through the Crisis Management Cell established early in the Syrian Civil War that basically micromanaged action against protests through the Ministry of Defence and Office of the President. But the hierarchy has increasingly shifted to localised command structures that have a lot of foreign influence over them, granting plausible deniability for how high up the chain of command any directive can go. In broad strokes, I would argue that most of the decision-making is still linked in one form or another back to the central government. The basic generalisation on how units receive orders is that the Syrian Ministry of Defence or Office of the President will send out a *demarche* that says 'accomplish this objective – seize this x terrain in this x given time'. It is then up to the local battlefield commanders to muster their resources in coordination with foreign backers and others to get an operation up and ongoing. There are multiple levels of central touchpoints and oversight but that decentralisation and fragmentation of command authority is something that the regime and the pro-regime coalition as a whole is still struggling to deal with. As I noted, elite forces and foreign forces are the most likely to have participated in frontline operations or in any sort of operation that would involve moving into urban areas, clearing urban terrain, or seizing villages. This isn't always necessarily the case – there are certain times and places in which SAA units featured prominently in different forms of clearing operations, particularly in the early days of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 - 2012. At that time, there were task-organized regular army units that conducted operations in Idlib and Homs Provinces, for example. A key point to note about those units was that they were often the most loyal or perceived-to-be-loyal elements of multiple regular units that were pressed together into a task force for whichever operation was ongoing – so for instance, the initial clearing operations in Idlib Province were actions conducted by what was listed as a single brigade but was actually units from multiple brigades pulled together, either on an individual basis, right up to company or battalion level. These units were cobbled together into an battalion that the regime viewed as trustworthy enough to conduct some of these initial clearing operations in the very early days of the Syrian Civil War. The very method by which the regime has survived makes the identification of specific military units, their activities, and their locations very difficult.

Question and Answer

Do you have any information on recruitment to the Fourth and Fifth Storming Corps? Is it happening on a voluntary basis or a forced basis? One one hand, they try to attract people with better salaries but on the other hand there are some information that seems to show it isn't voluntary necessarily – how is the situation?

My understanding is that it is actually a mix – when the Fifth Storming Corps was originally founded it aimed to draw from the population paramilitary volunteers. Some of these volunteers were told to enlist in the corps by their commanders, but yes, initially they were presented an attractive offer of good weapons, high salaries, and Russian training and advisors. These efforts failed to meet all the benchmarks for recruitment. By early 2017, we saw reports of individuals being conscripted into the Fifth Storming Corps. So it seems to be a fusion of both. The core of it is formed from volunteers from paramilitary groups, but it is rounded out by conscripts added to the unit as required.

What are the possibilities for Sunni Arabs in all those elite structures? Given the suggestion it would be that sometimes elite units are combined with regular units...?

None of these elite forces exclude Syrian Sunnis. The proportion of non-Sunnis in these units is nonetheless disproportionate. The Fourth Armoured Division and the Republican Guard are the most disproportionate in terms of drawing enlisted members and officers from Druze, Alawites, and other minorities. The Special Forces Regiments have more inclusion for Sunnis. The Sunnis that enlist in these elite units are often the lower-tier of basic infantry inside the unit (NCOs) rather the actual officer corps – though there are likely some Sunnis who serve as officers in elite units. The (former) Syrian Minister of Defence Fahd Jassem al-Freij is himself a Sunni from a Sunni family from Hama Province. So, there is a loyal network of Sunnis that certainly exist in Syria. The ranks of the elite units are still highly disproportionate, when looking at the numbers, compared to the demographics of Syria. Even when we see elite units embedded with the conscript-heavy units in the SAA to execute tasks, the command of the overall unit is retained with the elite unit, which is generally led disproportionately by minority populations. Similarly, in the Syrian Arab Air Force, there are Sunni but the force is generally disproportionately drawn from Alawites and other minorities.

Are you aware of any confirmed change that would see recruitment past the age of 42?

I have not personally seen any change to the maximum age of military service at 42. I haven't seen it formally. There have been rumours of arbitrary recruitment beyond that age, but as for any announced change by a relevant authority – I have not found it. One of the other things that I have not found is the renewal on the general amnesty law that had been renewed in 2016 and set to expire in the spring of 2017. This law was the overall amnesty decree that authorized a general amnesty, and local amnesties, for individuals who want to put down their weapons and return to the fold of the state. I haven't found any formal decree extending that amnesty. What I suspect is that the government is moving towards more local reconciliations and thus the general amnesty is perhaps seen as less necessary at this stage of the conflict. The regime seems to be shifting more to local amnesties, which can be respected to a varying degree depending on how the regime decides to respect it. Similarly, I haven't seen a formal change in the exemption ages. There have been changes that I've seen in the cost of deferral for individuals who travel abroad – but not formal changes in the age of recruitment, that I have seen. There might have been such changes but I haven't seen them. We nonetheless do see some individuals recruited outside the age of 42. We see this especially in the specialty occupations – particularly among individuals with a specialisation in their military booklet such

tank or artillery operators – tasks that are more specialised and harder to train. There have been reports of people both older and younger than the benchmarks being conscripted.

Are traditional written convocations still issued for recruitment to military service?

My understanding is that written directives that get to the conscripts themselves are sent down to the recruitment office first and then it gets sent to their home or posted. That still exists in that there is still a formal state mechanism to do that – but that proceeds in parallel with these other less formal forms of recruitment such as raids and checkpoints, which are generally, at this point, the ones that are more proactive at pulling conscripts in. If you get a notice, you're more likely to disappear or avoid it. We have seen them modify the procedure for how it works – so basically, going around the police stations and going directly to the checkpoints rather than the recruitment division offering circulars to the local police, which would then make a posting. They were circumventing the police stations because the police would be the first point of contact for someone to pay an informant to tell them if their name came up on a list at the police office, and then they would disappear. We have seen efforts to circumvent that escape route and make the process more targeted against those whose names appear on the list. But there are definitely these parallel processes.

They will conscript individuals displaced from other regions – for example, I remember in 2014, they called up reservists from Raqqa and Deirezzor Provinces, which, obviously the regime at that time did not hold a significant presence in. What these directives allowed the regime to do was mobilise individuals that had fled from eastern Syria and resettled in western Syria. They still were issuing mobilisation, recruitment and conscription directives even in provinces outside their control to target individuals from other areas.

Is it still a conscription without an end?

Yes, my understanding is that no unit has been formally dismissed. People pay sums to get out or reach understandings with their commander, pay them off, for instance – but, since 2011, no conscript class has been officially released from duty – that is my understanding.

My comment is on foreign fighters – we should single out Hezbollah in respect to other Shia militias and the Iranians. Hezbollah is not a 'proxy militia', it is the direct arm of Iran – Hezbollah is special compared to all the other militias – it is the success story of Iran exporting itself. Most of the leaders were in Najaf studying when Khomeini was still there. They know each other from this time – this is an organic relationship. I'm not talking about the rank and file of the Lebanese fighting forces from outside. The Hezbollah structure is a part of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I think that is quite important to have in mind when we discuss this – they are not like the Afghans, nor the Pakistanis. The Lebanese Hezbollah is very special in this regard.

I'm in complete agreement with you there – Hezbollah, unlike all the other militias – Hezbollah has its own leadership delegate in these operations rooms and crisis cells, along with Iran (so, Iran actually has two delegates) – but they do hold a lot of influence over pro-regime operations. When we see foreign fighter units deployed to the frontline or even the training of NDF militias, it is often Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah acting as an organic whole that are acting as the trainer cadre. Pro-regime fighters get sent to training camps in Lebanon just as often as they are sent to training camps in Iran. They send individuals out of Syria for specialised training and then redeploy them back into the Syrian Civil War. The role that Hezbollah plays here is much more proactive – you're right. It is much more of a leadership

role, alongside Iran, where they almost always operate hand in glove. The area where that is a little different is the Lebanese-Syrian border where you see less direct IRGC leadership presence. Hezbollah has the command and control authority in that area.

Do units who retake an area conscript from that area? Is there competition between different units in the army with regards to conscription because they all lack manpower? It is not centralised to come extent. Can you comment on whether you have observed this?

I have heard some reports of this happening but I don't know how widespread it is. Certainly we have seen reports that – just as with paramilitary groups who extract resources when they control an area - the SAA units will extract resources in the form of manpower as well as other resources from the areas placed under their control. We've seen a lot more reports in the open press of basically cross-branch competition, rather than within the SAA itself. But we have seen some indications of this practice – particularly in the south where there are many divisions bunched in the same areas and all competing for recruits – and in Hama Province, where regime units are competing against each other to some extent. Again, because of the *qataa* system, the local commanders have a lot of discretion over their region and so it is very decentralised – if you're looking at the very senior levels of the SAA, it may look like the SAA controls this, but actually it is a local commander who controls local areas, likely with overlapping zones of authority and competition from paramilitaries and other groups that draw resources from the same areas within his zone of control. I can't confirm it as very widespread, though I've seen some reports of the nature you've described.

About Iraqi Shia militias – my understanding is that they were redirected back to Iraq to deal with the ISIS threat there – what is their level of presence in Syria now?

The Iraqi presence is back up. Yes, in 2014, the Iraqi Shia militias redeployed 'home' to Iraq because Mosul had fallen and so this is when you had some of the Afghan Shia militias starting up because they needed to backstop the Iraqi Shia militias who were leaving to go to Iraq and other foreign forces were stepping in. Particularly since November 2015, when Russia and Iran agreed in tandem – Russia started its intervention, but it started its intervention based on basically the idea that Iran will up its manpower if Russia gets involved from the air and to an extent on the ground. This is when Iraqi Shia militias also started coming back – now they are coming back in different guises – whereas prior to 2014 you had a lot of umbrella organisations that would incorporate elements of Iranian proxy militias – they would take people from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, or they would take people from Badr Corps and other things and kind of enmesh them in together. Now, you are seeing units actually deploy basically in whole – but they are unique in that they are not as active on the ground in Iraq as they are in Syria. They are basically basing their command structure inside Syria instead of the other way around. The most prevalent units on the ground right now in Syria are Hartm al-Nujiba – the Nujiba movement – as well as Kata'ib Hezbollah, which is a designated terrorist organisation by the US government. Both those militias have a presence in Iraq but my understanding is that the bulk of their fighters are in Syria. As the fight has moved down Deir ez-Zor and closer to the Iraqi-Syrian border, we've seen bleed-over of other Iraqi Shia popular mobilisation units (PMUs) that are ostensibly under the control of the Iraqi state – moving across the border to help pro-regime forces. That whole intersection is interesting because there is a command cell called the quartet (Russia, Iran, Syria and Iraq)...and the whole tug and pull of PMUs that are responsive to Iran on the Syrian side and the pull from Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi that the PMU should be under the control of the state so we aren't going to authorise them to go. It is kind of a gray zone where Abadi has said they aren't going to formally cross over but uses very couched language that allows this fudging of the lines.

What is the purpose of using poorly trained Afghans and Pakistani militias on the frontline activities when they might endanger your frontline activities?

You're right, they are not very effective. They have largely been used as a source to provide bodies, basically, on key fronts where they can help to break through – they are often used as the frontline probing force – the first wave of testing a front followed by the more premier Iraqi Shia militias, or elite Syrian units or what have you. We have seen the Afghan Shia militias perform that kind of combat leading role in certain areas of Deraa Province – Busra al-Harir was one such area where the Afghan Shia led an attempt to punch through that failed. Also in central Syria the Afghan Shia have played a leading role in some campaigns, although they have shifted more to an auxiliary role in the fight in eastern Syria. The Afghan Shia are gradually taking less of the cannon fodder frontline role but they initially served as a backstop to garrison the areas from which the Iraqi Shia had to leave in 2014. Then they were repurposed in an attempt to exert pressure on opposition frontlines that had not traditionally been tested – where the regime needed manpower to press a sector of the frontline in areas where the opposition density was lower and see if they could break through. In a couple of places it worked, and a couple it didn't – and where it didn't, it went very badly for the Afghan Shia militias. Their value has really been just for additional manpower, more so than any unique capabilities – they often receive very minimal training. It is more bodies for garrison tasks and breakthroughs. A lot of the IRGC advisors for the Afghans that we see killed in action were former Basij commanders, or came from Basij units. It is very similar.

Syrian paramilitary groups normally operate regionally - are they on the frontline as well?

Some of them are. Some tend to operate very locally focused – particularly ones that are drawn from ethnic communities, especially in western Homs and Hama Provinces. But there are subsets of paramilitary groups that get deployed on the frontlines and outside of their home regions on a much more regular basis. The Desert Hawks got deployed all over the country, even though they were ostensibly from Latakia Province on the Syrian Coast. The Palestinian Liwa al-Quds actually has a large footprint now even though they are supposedly drawn from just local factions in Aleppo City. I think their recruitment pool has expanded. It basically depends on the paramilitary group – a lot of groups stay active in just their province or their local area, but there are select groups that get deployed further afield either because they actually have superior fighting capabilities, they have a lot of foreign support, or they are attempting to curry favour with regime structures by contributing to regime offensives.

Are Palestinians' military booklets the same as regular military service booklets?

My understanding is that it is the same military booklet.

3. Family law (E. van Eijk)

3.1 Family law in Syria: Historical developments

We are now already 6.5 years into the Syrian conflict – in mid-March 2011, when the first popular protests were held in various places in Syria, we could not foresee that – that what started as a revolution, would turn into a full-scale proxy war with many different factions fighting against the Al-Assad government and fighting each other. Now, 6.5 years into the conflict, the situation does not look promising. We cannot predict what this conflict entails for the future of Syria: the country, its people, the composition of the government and – relevant for today's subject – the legal system.

However, despite the ongoing, disturbing events taking place in Syria today and not knowing what the future will hold, Syrian family law has a number of antecedents that are important to clarify. I want to clarify that when I talk about Syria's legal system and family law in particular, I refer to the pre-2011 situation, so before the outbreak of the current conflict. Moreover, since the legal system has not been disbanded and still appears to function, at least in the government-controlled areas, I will consider the official Syrian legal system, its laws and institutions as currently in force. First, it is important to understand the religious make-up of the country – it is a multi-faith country made up of:

- Sunni Muslim majority and various non-Sunni Muslim minorities
- Druze community
- Various Christian communities (Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants)
- Very small Jewish community (most of them left in the 1990s).

Before we look at the present time, I would like to briefly point out some of the major historical episodes that are relevant to the contemporary legal system: a mix of Ottoman (*millet*-system of separate personal status laws distinct for each religious group), French laws (under the French Mandate), Egyptian legal traditions, including religion-based law (predominately in the domain of family law).

Independent Republic (1946-present)

Following the independence from France in 1946, Syria was subjected to a string of military regimes (1946-1963), followed by the United Arab Republic with Egypt (1958-61) under leadership of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. It is interesting to note that many laws that are still in force today date back to the period of early independence and political instability (between 1946-63, i.e. before the Al-Assad's came to power), e.g. Civil Code (1949), Code Penal (1949), Nationality Law (1951), and the law that is of great importance when we talk about Syrian family law: The Syrian Law of Personal Status (SLPS) (1953). The SLSP applies to all Syrians, though the Jewish, Christian and Druze communities are exempted from most of its provisions.

The United Arab Republic was the materialisation of the nationalist dream of Arab unity and social equality for all. It only lasted only 3.5 years. Syrians, especially members of the socialist Ba'th Party, were disappointed with the union, mostly because of Egypt's political dominance. On 18 September 1961, a group of army officers staged a coup d'état, which led to Syria's secession from the UAR and the Syrian Arab Republic was reinstated. Socialist Ba'th Party seized power in 1963. After a few years of internal party struggles and the Six-day war with Israel in 1967, army officer Hafez Al-Asad seized power in November 1970. With his ascension

to power, Syria entered a period of relative political stability. The new regime established itself as a strong authoritarian power; it controlled the country by creating a strong state apparatus dominated by Ba'th Party members, aided by a vast omnipresent secret police force. The Arab socialist Ba'th movement was an intellectual movement, founded by two Syrians in the early 1940s: Michel 'Aflaq and Salahadin al-Bitar. The movement advocated a social revolution which would lead to one Arab nation, free from Western imperialism, in which Arab and social values would be guaranteed. As pan-Arab nationalism and socialism were the dominant ideologies, any form of religious, sectarian, regional or tribal factionalism had to be resisted for the sake of national unity. Under Hafez al-Asad the 'Personal Status' system was maintained, despite attempts to introduce a secular 'Personal Status' system. The most recent serious amendments to the SLPS date back to 1975.

The Syrian Constitution of 2012 contain a few significant articles for family law, under Article 3. In particular, the second and fourth paragraph of this article are of importance to family law.

- Article 3, paragraph 2 reads 'the Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is a main source of law'. At present, the Islamic legal principles are most obviously and predominantly present in the 1953 Syrian Law of Personal Status (more than any other law code);
- Article 3, paragraph 4: this paragraph is relatively 'new' (added in 2012, no similar provision in the 1973 Constitution); it states that 'the personal status of the religious groups shall be protected and respected'.

The Republic prides itself on being a secular nation where the various religious communities co-exist peacefully. The major Muslim and Christian holidays, for example, such as 'id al-adha (Sacrifice Feast), Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, Easter (both Catholic and Orthodox) and Christmas are officially observed because Syria is, officially, a secular state and it therefore has no state religion. That said, Islam remains the prevailing religion and maintains the upper hand in all strata of society, including the Constitution. Seemingly contradictory, this is (I would say) typical for Syria. Officially it is a secular state, which prides itself for being multireligious and where the different religions peacefully coexist, but Islam nevertheless has a prevalent, dominant position (which also has a historical origin), also in the 'Personal Status' system. Nevertheless, the recognised non-Muslim, minority communities, including their legal and judicial autonomy in personal status, are respected and guaranteed.

3.2 Family law in Syria: A plural legal landscape

The term 'Personal Status' (*ahwal al-shakhsiyya*) refers to 'family law'. Where we use the term 'family law', in Syria, like many other Arab countries, we use the term 'personal status'. I use the terms interchangeably. Family or personal status law in Syria is characterised by:

- 1) religion, and;
- 2) plurality.

The various religious communities - Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Jewish - have the right to regulate matters of personal status according to their respective religious laws and customs. Family law is organised according to religion or denomination, meaning that the religion (*din*) or denomination (*ta'ifiyya*) of a person is the determining feature in choosing which personal status law applies (i.e. a continuation of the *millet*-system from the Ottoman times). The

religion into which one is born determines which jurisdiction applies in matters of personal status. If you are born as a Muslim, your family relations are governed by the 1953 SLPS (i.e. the law for Muslims). If you are born as a Greek Orthodox Christian, your family relations are governed by the 2004 Greek Orthodox Law of Personal Status. Hence, Syria's family law is a mosaic of various personal status laws and courts. The different laws are all religion-based laws and many personal status courts are – to varying degrees – religious courts.

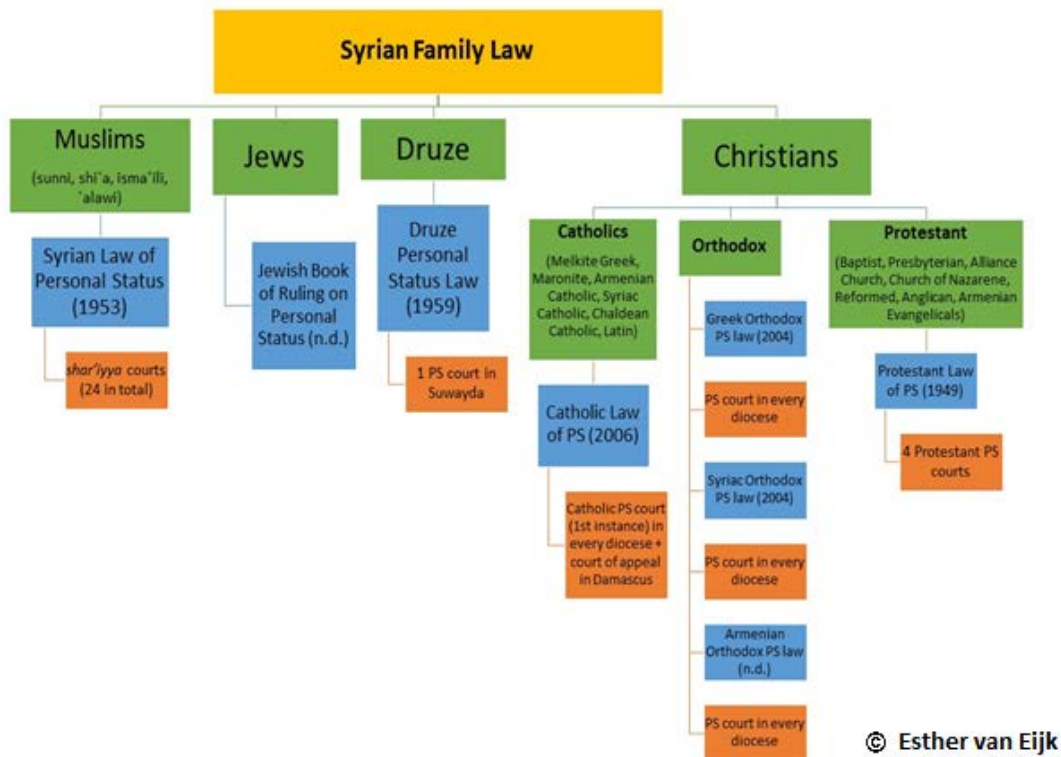
The term 'statut personnel' originates from Medieval Europe and was used to denote rules and regulations concerning the status and capacity of persons, vis-à-vis the term 'statut réel', which referred to matters connected to property. The term 'personal status' (in Arabic: *ahwal al-shakhsiyya*) was only introduced in Arab legal writings in the late nineteenth century, most notably by Muhammad Qadri Pasha in Egypt.

The most important law in this legal landscape is the **Syrian Law of Personal Status (SLPS), Law no. 59/1953** :

- **Art 306:** provides that the provisions of the law apply to all Syrians (the general law, *qanun 'amm*), except for what is stated in the following two articles:
- **Art. 307:** provides that the Druze community is explicitly exempted from those provisions that run counter to their beliefs,
- **Art. 308:** provides that the Jewish community and the various Christian communities are exempted from numerous SLPS provisions, and that they will – *instead* – apply **their own religious regulations** in matters of personal status (in other words: they have their own personal status laws & courts),

BUT in some cases Christians, Druze and Jews are still required to refer to *shar'iyya*-courts (i.e. the courts that apply the SLPS), namely in matters related to paternity (*nasab*) and legal guardianship (*wilaya*). The result is a legal maze of overlapping regulations and jurisdictions. The system is complex, also for practising Syrian lawyers; also because, for example, law graduates receive little to no training in Christian family law. It is particularly complex in interfaith marriages – which, although rare, do occur (no numbers/statistics available). The plurality of the 'Personal Status' system does not, however, entail equality between the different religious communities, but rather an asymmetrical plurality, because of the SLPS and the *shar'iyya* courts clearly have the upper hand. The supremacy of the SLPS and the *shar'iyya* courts is explained by the concept of public order (*al-nizam al-'amm*). The supremacy of the SLPS becomes especially apparent when the jurisdictions of different religions intersect. When a non-Muslim woman marries a Muslim man, the SLPS will be applicable; when a Druze woman marries a Sunni Muslim man, again the SLPS will be applicable. A Christian or Jewish woman, that is, a woman who belongs to the *ahl al-kitab* (the recognised monotheistic religions), can marry a Muslim man, but it is not possible for a non-Muslim man to marry a Muslim woman, for Article 48.2 SLPS states that a marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man is considered invalid (*batil*). If a non-Muslim man wants to marry a Muslim woman, he needs to convert to Islam.

Below is a graphic which presents an overview of the Syrian family legal system. It should be noted that the Assyrian Church of the East is not included in this graphic. I have no information on the legal situation of this 'group', but I assume its members are governed by a separate personal status code, as they are recognized as a religious community with legislative and judicial autonomy in personal status matters.



The SLPS is based on Islamic legal principles, mainly derived from Hanafi *fiqh* and it covers all matters of personal status, i.e. marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance. Amendments were made in 1975, 2003, 2010. The courts implementing the SLPS are *shar'iyya*-courts (24 in total). Although judges of these courts administer, for the most part, shari'a-based law, they are part of civil law system. The judges are trained at regular law faculties and function as civil law judges. However, this does not exclude the fact that most *shar'iyya* judges appeared, in my observation, to be faithful Muslims. When we look at the Christian communities, we see something different. The different Christian communities not only have their own laws, but also different denominational courts (not civil courts), presided over by clerical judges (not law graduates).

For those who are more familiar with contemporary Muslim law, might be interested to know that the SLPS also contains a so-called 'residual' article (similar to many other present-day Muslim family laws). This states: '[i]n every matter in regard to which there is no relevant provision in this Law reference shall be made to the most authoritative doctrine in Hanafi school'.

This is a welcome option for legal practitioners as the substantive text of the SLPS is rather brief in many areas. For the practical application of Article 305, judges and lawyers still consulted and referred to the personal status code compiled by the Egyptian jurist Qadri Pasha in 1875, which is much more detailed than the SLPS. The edition of the SLPS issued by the Syrian Bar Association consists of two parts: first, the substantive text of the SLPS itself, followed by the complete text of the Qadri Pasha code (647 articles). The Hanafi doctrine thus remains not only the point of departure of the SLPS (main source of law), but also the final resort. With Article 305, the Syrian legislator facilitated resort to references outside the SLPS.

This inherent flexibility of the SLPS and its open norms allows judges wide discretion in deciding personal status cases.

Christians and family law

About ten per cent of the population belongs to one of the Christian denominations. The various Christian communities of Syria can be divided into three groups: the largest group are the Orthodox Christians (est. 704,200 souls), the Catholic churches (est. 204,600 members), and the Protestants or Evangelicals (est. 20,100). Nearly every denomination or group has its own family law, including for example: the Greek Orthodox Personal Status Law (2004), the Syriac Orthodox Personal Status Law (2004), and the Catholic Law of Personal Status (2006).

For example: For Catholics:

- The Catholic churches of the East are united in communion with the Bishop of Rome, which means they acknowledge the Pope's authority;
- There are six Catholic denominations but they are governed by one personal status law, promulgated in 2006 (Catholic Law of Personal Status, Law no.31/2006);
- The main source of the 2006 Catholic law: Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (CCEO), issued by late Pope John Paul II in 1990. A significant part of Law no. 31/2006 is a direct translation of the Eastern Codex. The CCEO governs the ecclesiastical life of the Eastern Churches, including organisation of the Church, religious practices such as prayer, celebration of the Eucharist, and other sacraments such as marriage & nullification procedures.
- The Catholic judges are priests and trained in Oriental canon law in Rome.

Each personal status court has its characteristics, routine and distinctive character. The proceedings in the Catholic court and the demeanour of the Catholic judges, however, were, in my observation, rather different, compared to their colleagues of the *shar'iyya* and Greek Orthodox courts. The Catholic court's setting and performance appeared more religious than legal. For example: the court room is located on the church premises; every court day started with a community prayer led by the presiding judge; the judges' and court personnel's attire was quite distinctive: the judges were dressed in a cassock (clerical robe), the other court personnel usually wore a clerical collar; and finally, whereas a *shar'iyya* judge would be addressed as '*ustadh*' (polite form of address for an educated, respectable person), a Catholic judge preferred to be addressed as '*abuna*' (i.e. 'father'). In fact, litigants or lawyers would be corrected by the judges or the scribe if they used the word '*ustadh*' by mistake.

3.3 Marriage

Below is a comparison of how marriage is treated according to classical Islamic law and under the SLPS. These components (on the left) are required according to (classical) Islamic law, to make it a valid Islamic marriage. On the right the requirements according to SLPS are listed, which are similar to classical Islamic legal principles. I show this table to show that the provisions of the SLPS closely follow classic Islamic principles, and because of the similarities in requirements, it is easier to register (*ex post facto*) an unregistered Islamic marriage, to make it an official legally valid marriage (according to the SLPS).

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Muslim marriage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage is commendable (<i>sunna</i>) • Marriage legalizes sexual relations; preservation of paternal lineage • Marriage is a contract, requiring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer & acceptance - Legal capacity and 'of age' (bride & groom) - 2 witnesses - Dower (<i>mahr</i>) - Legal guardian (<i>wali</i>) - Equal social status (<i>kafa'a</i>) (Hanafi) | <p>Syrian Law of Personal Status (Law No. 59/1953)</p> <p><u>Art. 1 SLPS</u>: 'Marriage is a contract between a man and a woman, who is lawfully permitted to him, with the aim to establish a bond for a joint life and procreation.'</p> <p>Requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer & acceptance (Arts. 5-11) • Legal capacity and 'of age' (Arts. 15-20) • 2 witnesses (2♂, or 1♂+2♀) (Arts. 12) • Legal guardian (Arts. 20-25) • Equal social status/suitability of the groom (Arts. 26-32) • Dower (Arts. 53-64) |
|--|---|

Legal marrying age

Marriage under the SLPS provides that the age of capacity for marriage is 18 years for the husband and 17 years for the wife (Art. 16 SLPS). Marriage at younger age is possible:

'When an adolescent boy (*murāhiq*) claims to be physically mature (i.e. *bulūgh*) after attaining the age of 15, or an adolescent girl (*murāhiqa*) after attaining the age of 13, the judge may allow the boy or girl to be wed, if he deems the petition to be sincere and they are physically capable.' [i.e. to have sexual relations] (Art. 18.1 SLPS)

The conditions to marry at an age younger than the SLPS prescribes are:

- permission of the judge (Arts. 18.1, 19)
- permission of the legal guardian (*wali*) of the (minor) bride (Art. 18.2)
- both spouses have to be physically mature

Marriage by proxy

- Marriage by proxy is possible under SLPS Arts. 8-9;
- Druze: marriage by proxy possible (Art. 14 Druze Law on Personal Status);
- Eastern Catholics: marriage by proxy not possible (however, some exceptions), Can. 837 CCEO;
- Protestants nothing about proxy marriages in their PS Code;
- Other Eastern churches: nothing about proxy marriages, probably also not allowed -> because same doctrine as Eastern Catholics.

Unregistered marriages

SLPS allows for legal enforcement of extra-judicial customary practices, i.e. retro-active registration of:

- Customary ('urfi) marriages
- Proof of paternity (*nasab*)

Customary Muslim marriages, called 'urfi marriages, are usually Islamically valid, provided the basic conditions are met (i.e. offer and acceptance, 2 witnesses, contract and dower; see table above). These 'urfi marriages are marriages that are concluded outside the legal system (usually at home, in the presence of family members and a religious figure).

For a 'urfi (or Islamic legal) marriage to be legally valid, it has to be registered in court. Art. 40.2 SLPS stipulates that a 'urfi marriage can be registered once the legal requirements are met. These requirements are listed in Article 40 paragraph 1, which stipulates that a couple needs to submit a marriage petition to a *shar'iyya* district judge (*qadi al-mantiqa*), which should include the following documents:

- i. a certificate issues by the local official (i.e. mukhtar) stating the name, age, and place of residence of both parties, the name of the marriage guardian, and a statement that there is no lawful impediment to the marriage (Art. 40.1 sub A);
- ii. a certified extract from the Civil Registry (*qayd nufus*) certifying the betrothed parties' civil status (Art. 40.1 sub B);
- iii. proof of a premarital medical examination attesting that there are no medical impediments to their marriage (Art. 40.1 sub B);
- iv. permission for marriage for those who serve in the army or those who are subject to military service (Art. 40.1 sub D);
- v. permission from the Security Department when one of the spouses is a foreigner (Art. 40.1 sub E).²

Article 40 paragraph 2 stipulates that a customary marriage can be registered once the required legal procedures are met. If, however, a child is born or a pregnancy is apparent, the marriage will be recognised without the required procedures. In the event that a child is born or a pregnancy is apparent, judges tend to agree to register the marriage, regardless of whether the required procedures are met.

Unregistered marriages and paternity of children

Customary 'urfi marriages are common practice in Syria. Proof of marriage and paternity are recurring issues in the *shar'iyya* courts; a child's paternity is generally registered simultaneously with a 'urfi marriage. In the pre-conflict situation for ordinary Syrian couples, both registrations were often straightforward. Once a 'urfi marriage is registered, it will be considered a legally valid marriage. As a result, the regulations pertaining to paternity of children born during a valid marriage are applicable (Art. 49). In line with the Islamic notion that the child belongs to the marriage bed (*al-walad li-l-firash*), the SLPS considers a child born during a valid marriage attributable to the husband (Art. 128 ff.). *Sharia* judges generally adopt a non-legalistic stance in these matters because of best interest of the child and mother; they would end up in a difficult position, i.e. an illegitimate relationship and illegitimate children if it is not recognised.

- NB - According to Arts. 469-61 Penal Law the (religious) man who concludes the marriage, the spouses, their representatives, and the witnesses are liable to legal

² van Eijk, E., *Family Law in Syria: Patriarchy, Pluralism and Personal Status Laws*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, p. 218.

punishment if the *'urfi* marriage is contracted without consideration of the legal requirements.

However: *shar'iyya* courts generally turn a blind eye to *'urfi* marriage practices.

- Couples do not just register their *'urfi* marriage but also their born and unborn children. The child's paternity is generally registered simultaneously with the *'urfi* marriage before the court; both registrations can be settled promptly by the court.
- When a *'urfi* marriage is registered, it is considered a legally valid marriage, and consequently, establishing proof of paternity should pose no problems.

The possibility to register customary marriages and establishment of paternity of children born from these marriages offer room for creative solutions and is a good example of the versatility of Syria's family law.

For the registration to be legally valid it has to be recognized and registered in the government courts. It may be possible to register with a 'rebel' court but it will not be acknowledged by the Syrian state. Apparently widows (of foreign or rebel fighters for example), children born outside Syria (neighbouring countries) or in rebel/IS controlled areas, experience difficulty registering their marriages and children. Leaving many children and (unofficially) married women unregistered. If they do not have access to Syrian courts/authorities (for registration), hopefully they can find someone (proxy arrangement) to do it on their behalf.

Marriage rights and duties

Marriage is a reciprocal marital bond: maintenance by the husband, in exchange for the obedience of the wife. The husband is obliged to pay wife a dower (*mahr*) plus 'maintenance' (*nafaqa*). There is no 'community of goods' – the dower remains the wife's property after marriage. Marriage must be consummated and co-habitation should occur after the after payment of dower. Obedience of the wife is understood by the co-habitation - when the wife leaves the conjugal house, without her husband's permission, she is considered disobedient (*nashiza*). When a court receives a claim for marital obedience it will have to investigate whether the wife has in fact left the house and what the reasons for the abandonment are. To determine whether the wife is really disobedient, witness statements are crucial, preferably coming from relatives and others who know and interact with the spouses regularly, for example neighbours.

Christian marriage

Marriage is a sacrament, a union between a baptized man and woman. It is celebrated in church (of the husband) and recognized as a valid marriage by the state. The Church informs the Civil Registry and the marriage is registered at the Civil Registry Office. A patriarchal family model also visible in Christian personal status laws & courts. There are similar rights and duties, such as the husband's obligation to provide maintenance and the wife's obedience to her husband.

3.4 Dissolution of marriage

Under the Syrian Law of Personal Status (Law No. 59/1953)

There are three types of Muslim divorce:

1. Repudiation/unilateral divorce (*talaq*) (Arts. 85-94)

- prerogative of the husband
- revocable (2x) during waiting period (*'idda*)
- husband has to pay the remaining dower amount and post-divorce maintenance during the wife's waiting period.

2. Divorce by mutual consent (*mukhala'a*) (Arts. 95-104)

- negotiated contract
- *talaq* for compensation paid by the wife

3. Judicial divorce (*tafriq*) (Arts. 105-115)

Grounds of divorce:

- disease or impotence husband
- absence or disappearance husband
- non-payment of maintenance by the husband
- marital discord (*shiqaaq*)

***Mukhala'a* divorce (by mutual consent)**

This is the most popular way to divorce, also when it started as a judicial divorce petition, it often ends in *mukhala'a*. It is seen as a 'fast and cheap' way to divorce, often for both the husband and the wife. Judicial divorce procedures are often costly and long-winded (a wife's only alternative to *mukhala'a*). A divorce by 'mutual consent' (*mukhala'a*) is characterized by:

- Often called a wife-initiated divorce;
- consent of both spouses is needed;
- wife compensates husband in exchange for *talaq*;
- compensation: usually (unpaid) deferred dower and her right to post-divorce maintenance;
- signed contract (wife needs to appear in court);
- final divorce;
- Husband released from further financial obligations.

Out-of-court divorce

Both *talaq* and *mukhala'a* are possible inside and outside of court.

- SLPS allows for (*ex post facto*) registration of out-of-court divorce (*talaq* and *mukhala'a*)
- Out-of-court divorces outnumber divorces issued by a judge

Wives in a state of limbo – they do not know whether they are legally divorced or not divorced. Because *talaqs* are often pronounced but not registered, women come to court to determine whether or not their husbands have divorced them. The courts need to establish, based on the statements of the litigants and witnesses, for example:

- Was *talaq* pronounced or not? How many times?
- Did the husband take the wife back? When?
- Did the husband pay the deferred dower and/or post-divorce *nafaqa*?

Christian 'divorce'

Christian marriage is seen as a sacrament and divorce is problematic or 'not possible'. Catholics only recognize nullification of marriage (*butlan*). The grounds for divorce are for example: Conversion to another religion, adultery, impotence or sexual dysfunction. The fact that marriage is considered a union before God is an essential property of a Christian marriage, therefore dissolving such a union is deemed problematic. In fact, 'indissolubility' is seen as another essential property of marriage. The Catholic church even renounces the very word 'divorce' (*talaq*), and only acknowledges nullification of a marriage (*butlan al-zawaj*), meaning that the spouses have to prove that the marriage was unsound from the very beginning. Through annulment, a marriage can be terminated, but only those marriages that were never valid in the first place. The one filing a nullification petition will have to prove that the marriage (in theory) never legally existed.

3.5 Child custody

Guardianship (*wilaya*) is a concept that includes:

- Guardianship over the person (*wilaya 'ala al-nafs*)
- Guardianship over the minor's property (*wilaya 'ala al-mal*)

The father of the child is the default guardian (*wali*) under Art. 170 SLPS. Guardianship belongs to the agnatic (male) line. An appointed guardian (*wasi*) is possible under Art. 173 ff SLPS.)

Custody/nursing rights (*hadana*) are:

- Prerogative of the mother (Art. 139 SLPS)
- Girls until the age of 13, boys until the age of 15 (Art. 146 SLPS)
- When mother remarries (a non-*mahram*) she loses *hadana*-right (Art. 138 SLPS)

3.6 Question and Answer

Are proxy marriages by Muslims possible?

According to van Eijk Marriage by proxy is possible on the basis of law of personal status (SLPS), however she has no further information about such practices. Among religious minorities marriage by proxy is possible among Druze, but not among Christians (at least not among the Eastern Catholic but possibly also among other Eastern churches). Concerning the possibility for both parties to get married by proxy it was discussed that there are no limitations and that neither party needs to be present during the ceremony.

[UNHCR] stated that concerning the format of the proxy contract UNHCR commented that the proxy contract should be presented in written form.

What about women who marry foreign fighters?

On marrying a foreigner (e.g. a foreign fighter), it was discussed that a Syrian woman needs a permission from the security department if the man she is planning to marry is a foreigner. It was added that the process involves a lot of bureaucracy and paperwork, but that the permission itself is not that difficult to get. On Syrian nationality: A woman can only pass her Syrian nationality to her child if the following conditions are met: I) the father is unknown; II) the child is born on Syrian soil. On 'urfi marriages: In Syria, it is possible to fabricate a 'urfi

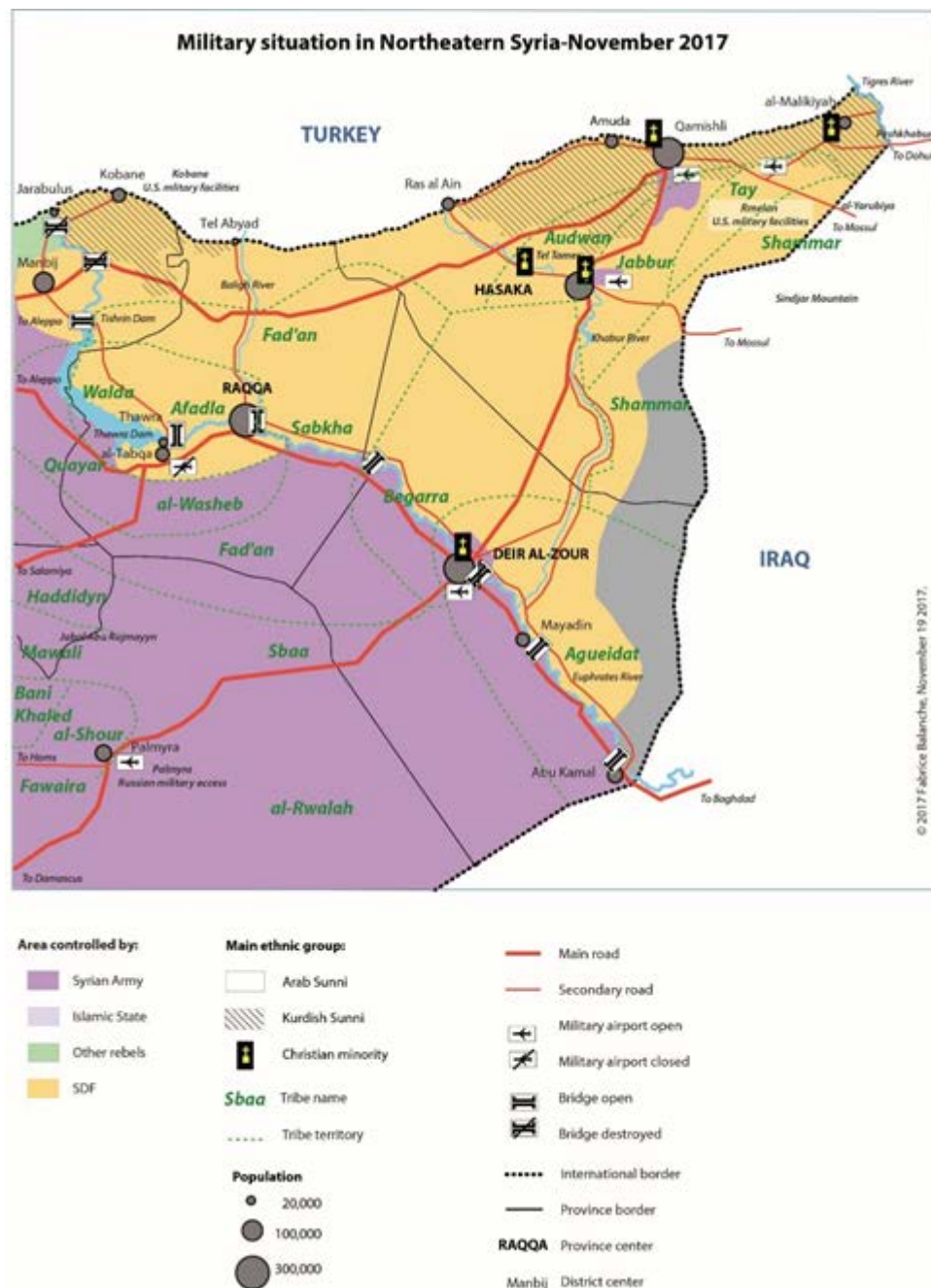
marriage contract with local judges approving it while being aware that the document is fake. This can be done for various reasons, e.g. to register a father to a child.

4. New protection considerations for Syria (UNHCR)

- UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update V, 3 November 2017, [url](#)
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Syria: "Illegal Exit" from Syria and Related Issues for Determining the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Syria, February 2017, [url](#)

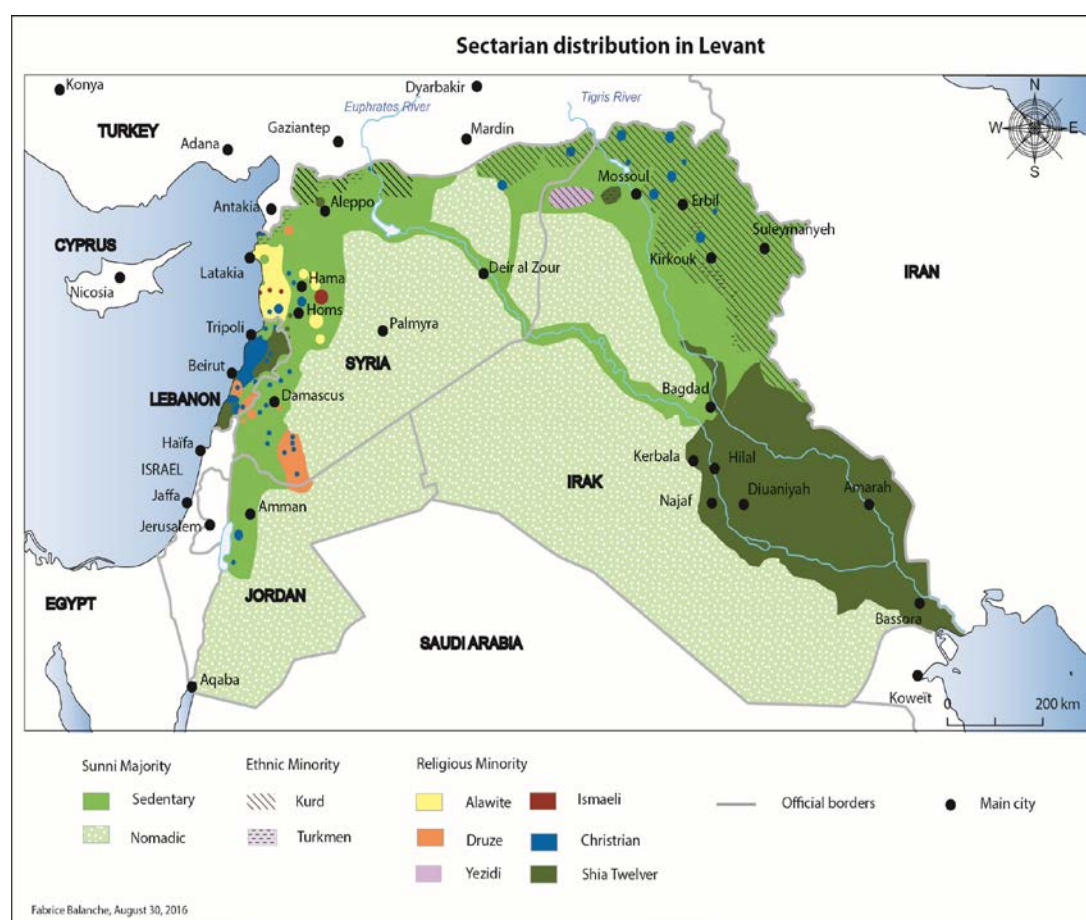
5. Situation in Kurdish areas/Rojava (F. Balanche)

5.1 Military, sectarian, and administrative divisions



I have been most recently in March 2017, to the Kurdish areas of Syria. My first impression was at the time of my first visit (2011) was that it was of the 'cultural revolution' - I was in Rojava where they were creating a multicultural place where Kurds, Arabs and others will be equal. When you visit the municipality of Hasakah you will meet a young Kurdish female mayor. But the real power holders – at that time the real mayor was with the YPG and was in Sinjar fighting with the Peshmerga. She was there as a picture of the local administration. I visited Rojava, Qamishli, Hasakah and Tel Amar, where you have the Assyrian villages. The demographic situation – you can see in yellow you can see the Kurdish area today. The yellow

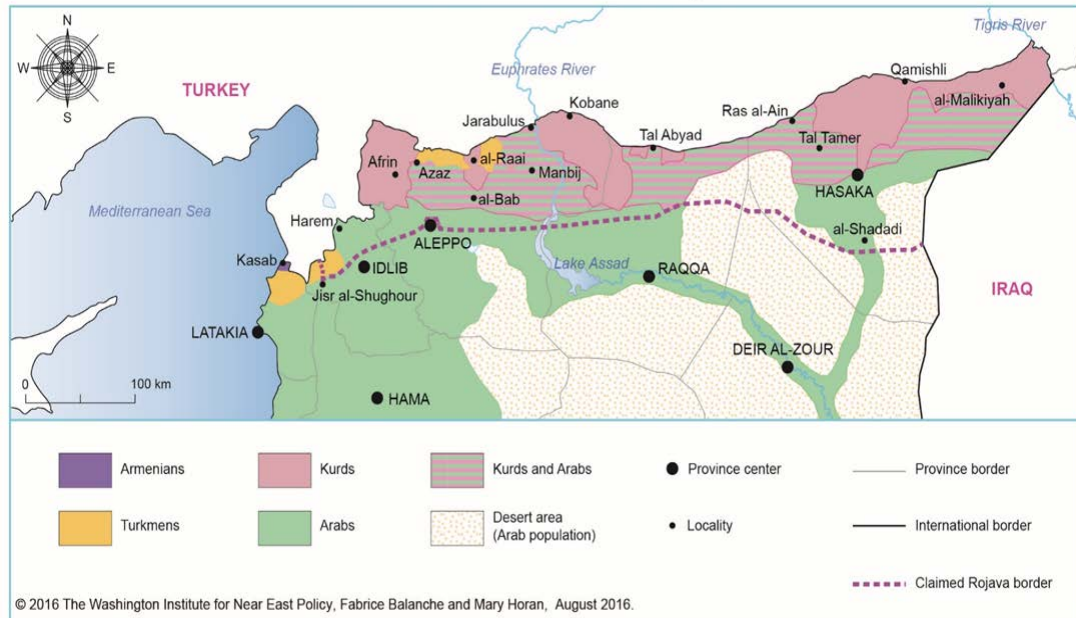
is really the SDF / Kurdish area. The leadership of the SDF you can say are Kurdish though half the fighters are Arab. The SDF are controlling today about 28% of Syrian territory, or about 3 million people. The majority of the population are Arab today. Before the war, the Kurds were about 3 million in Syria but you have two kinds of Kurds – 2 million feel they are Kurds, and 1 million who are ‘Arabised’ Kurds who were in Damascus or other areas before the war and more generations. They speak Arabic and Kurdish but not strongly involved in the Kurdish cause – it was clear they prefer to go to Lebanon than to get involved in the civil war. They never joined the PYD like the people from Afrin or Kobane, for instance. The Kurds in Aleppo are more ‘Kurdish’ – speak Kurdish and are proud to be so, especially those in Sheikh Maqsood area north of Aleppo city. The Kurdish middle class we can see in Aleppo neighbourhoods – they want to be integrated in Syria and don’t want to be part of the Kurdish cause. The issue of ethnicity is very difficult to define. If you are from Kurdish parents but you live in Damascus, you don’t feel Kurdish. But identity can change – if you are half Arab and half Kurd from Qamishli and the Kurds are leading the region, it is better to say you are Kurd if you want to be part of the winning group. Kurdish identity is thus difficult to define because of personal circumstances but also because of the situation in which you find yourself, and the place where you are living (**Map: Sectarian Distribution in Levant**).



This map (**Map: Ethnic Divisions in Northern Syrian**) shows the exact localisation of the Kurds in Syria (pink) and the dashed line are mixed areas. In pink you have 90% of Kurds. Pink/green shows about 25-75% of Kurds. The more you go north, the more you are in a Kurdish area. The dotted line is the area claimed as the Rojava. They want this area because also Afrin is a stronghold of the PYD. During the 80s when Ocalan was in Syria, 25% of PKK fighters were Syrian because Assad let the Kurds join the PKK and they weren’t obliged to do military service at that time if they joined the PKK. Fifty percent of the fighters were from Afrin (only 200,000

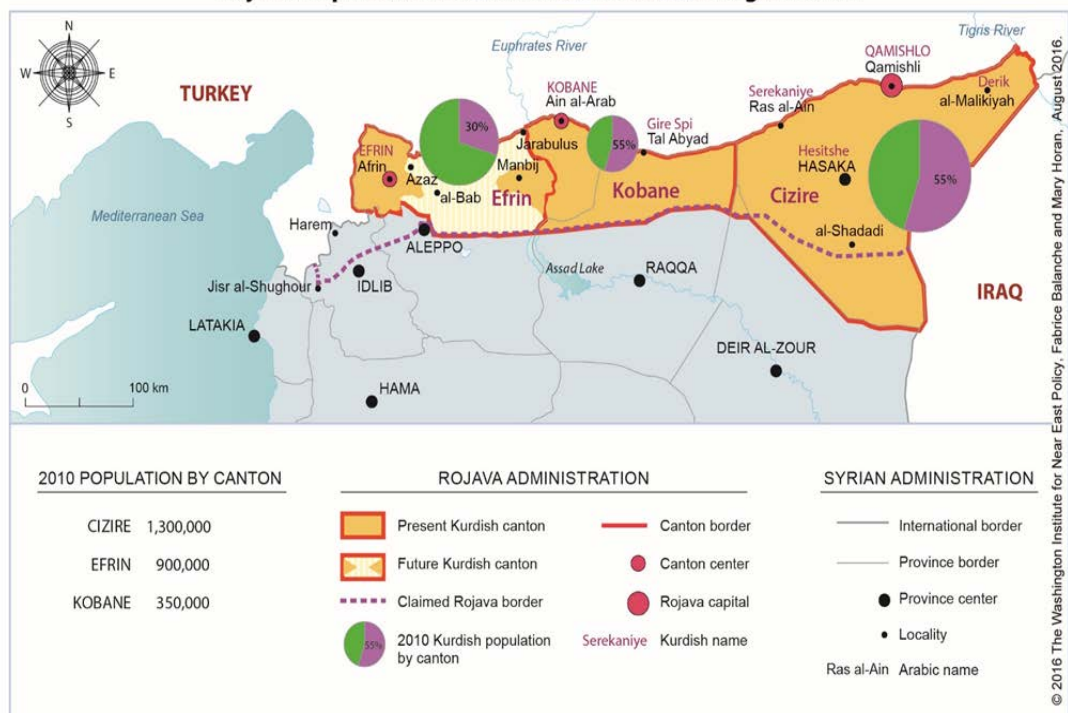
people). It is very important for PYD – most of them are from that area even if they are in Qamishli or elsewhere in Rojava – they are from Afrin, as are most leaders of the YPG. The junction between Kobane and Afrin is very important for them and they don't want to abandon it. It is still a potential fight with Turkey to occupy the area between Azaz and Jarablus.

Ethnic Divisions in Northern Syria



And when you see also the official maps of the PYD, Rojava is divided into 3 cantons:

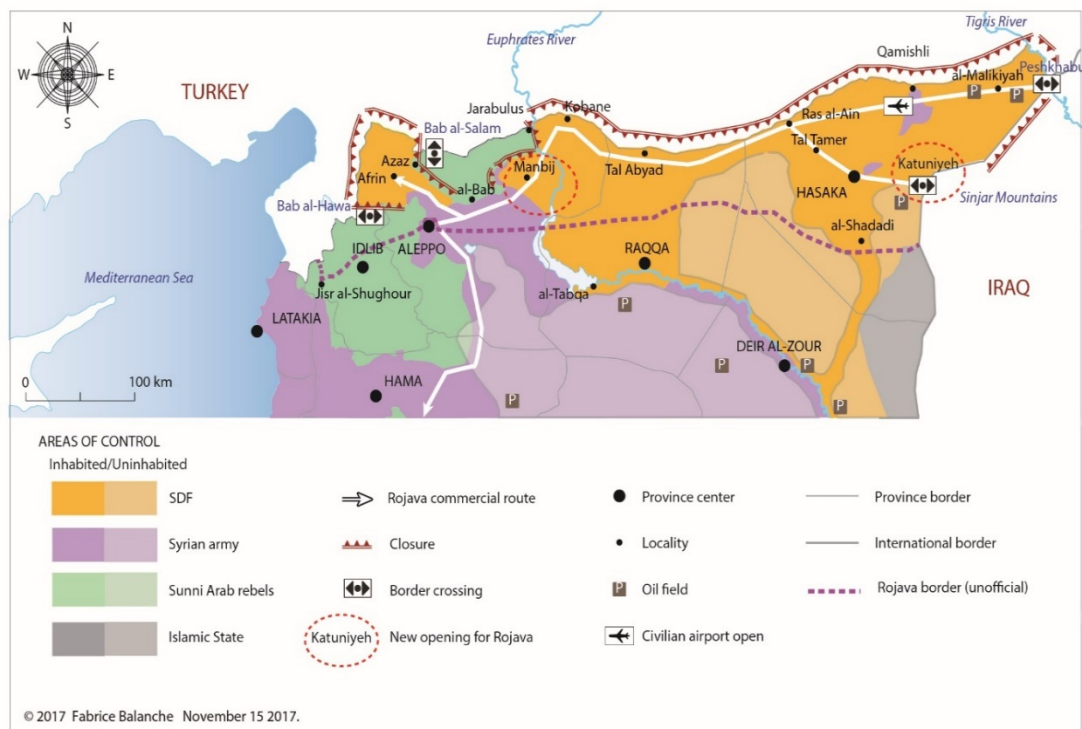
Rojava: Population and Future Administrative Organization



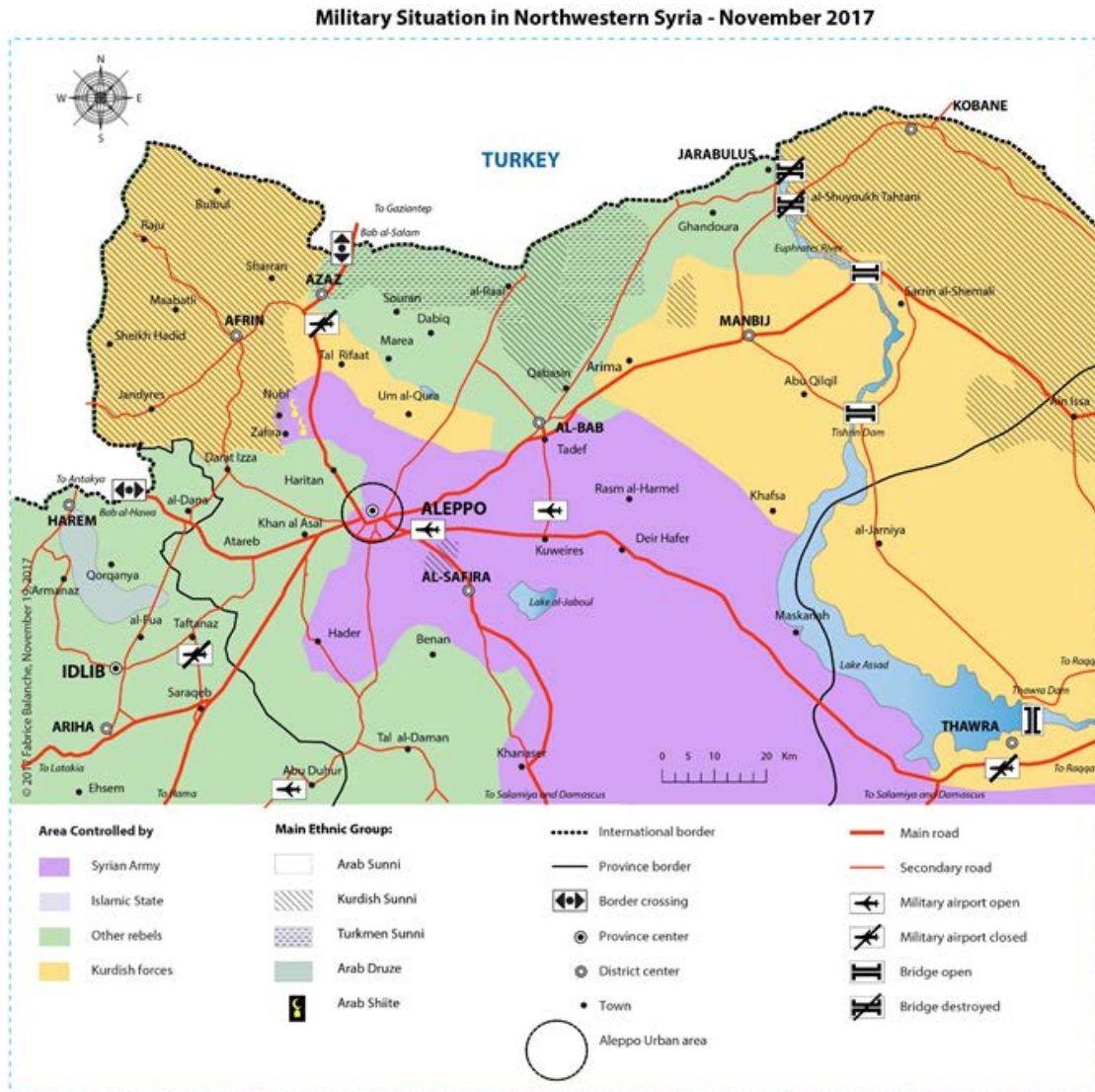
The three cantons are Afrin/Efrin, Kobane, and Cizire (also called Jazeera) – and you see Afrin and Manbij – even if the area has a Kurdish minority and the area has been destroyed by the Kurdish intervention and the residents expelled. The Kurdish population is 55% in Kobane,

55% in Cizire, and 30% in Afrin. Even in the so-called Kurdish cantons, the Kurdish population is the minority of the population in those areas. What they say of this region is that when we will take this area, Kurds who are Arabised will come back because we will be the masters of the area and the people will feel Kurd. Two hundred years ago, the Kurdish population was probably the majority but with Arabisation and migration, of course, they are now more Arab. You have place east of Latakia – very famous because it was an opposition battle – the name is Jabal al-Akrad, which means ‘mountain of the Kurds’, but the population there don’t speak Kurdish, they speak Arabic. It was at the time of Sultan Balbar in the 13th century that he brought some Kurdish tribes settling around Jabal al-Akrad – these are middle age period Kurds but now they are Arab. But they say perhaps it is possible to ‘re-Kurdishize’ the area and will have the majority in the free cantons. That’s why ‘teaching’ is very important for them.

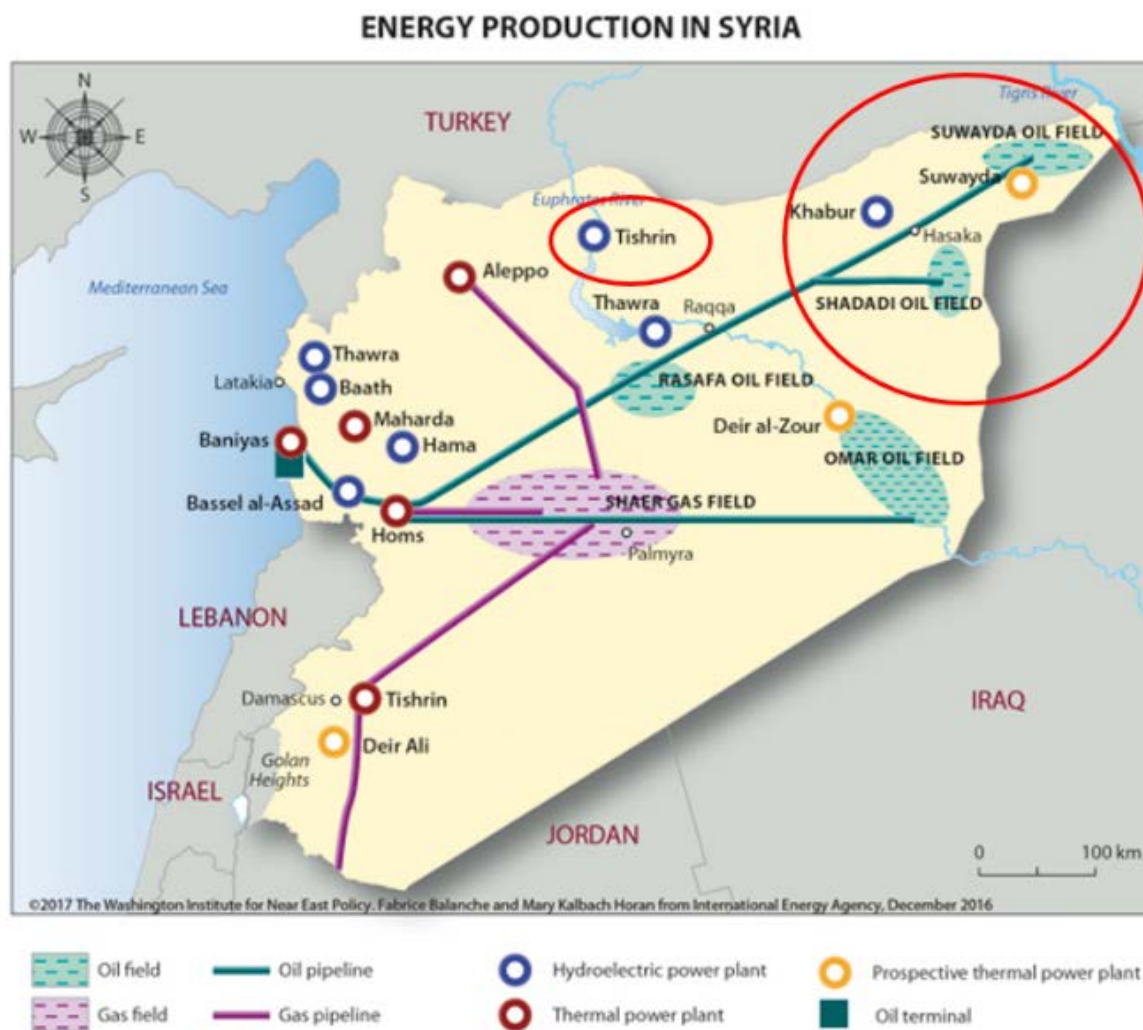
SDF extension in November 2017



This map (**Map: SDF Extension in November 2017**) shows the extension of the SDF today (November 2017) – they are now until the Euphrates river. In Raqqqa, now there are no Kurds, but before the war you have a 20% minority in Raqqqa but they fled – for Daesh this minority was a ‘fifth column’ – they were seen to be working with YPG, so they expelled them. Between Manbij and Azaz you have the Syrian army, the Turkish army, but they are waiting for the Turkish army to leave the area. When I was in Rojava in March 2017, Rojava was surrounded by the Turkish to the North and to the South, by Daesh. But when the Syrian army reopened the road between Aleppo and Manbij, it was very important for the economy of Rojava because they were no longer dependent only on Faysh Khabur (in Dohuk, Iraq) border point – it means from the KRG, from Barzani, who could open and close the border. The Kurds started to move more politically on the Damascus side because it was possible to buy some goods in Syria, to export wheat and oil to Afrin, for example. Today, Afrin is surrounded by Turkey because Turkey entered to Syria and is occupying many villages and are always in this area and want to take this land bridge to Al Bab. Erdogan is going to do something here – but it depends on the Russian reaction. If the Kurds don’t move closely to the Russian side, Putin will say to Erdogan to do whatever he wants in Afrin as a lesson to the PYD for their alliance with the US.



When I was in Rojava, Faysh Khabur (in Dohuk, Iraq) was the only gate for Rojava. On the Iraqi side you have to take a small boat (civilians) across the Tigris river and you arrive at the unofficial Rojava border where you take a taxi to go to customs (5 km). There is a bridge for trucks to cross with goods. You take a mud road as it is an unofficial border. The roads are very bad – you can see oil wells there. In Derik, about one third of Syrian oil production is there (180,000 barrels per day) – and it is a chance for Rojava as a potential source of revenue. Probably they don't increase their production (no more than 10-20k barrels) because they couldn't export that much until last summer. It is useful for electricity because in each neighbourhood you have a motor producing electricity only for 8 hours per day starting at noon. They can have gas for the car, but you can't drive more than 60 km per hour maximum because the gas is not well refined. What is more important – it is fuel for the motor pumps for irrigation and in this area, you can't have agriculture without irrigation, and you also have to pump water to wells 200 m below ground. Without oil, all the economy of Rojava will be destroyed.

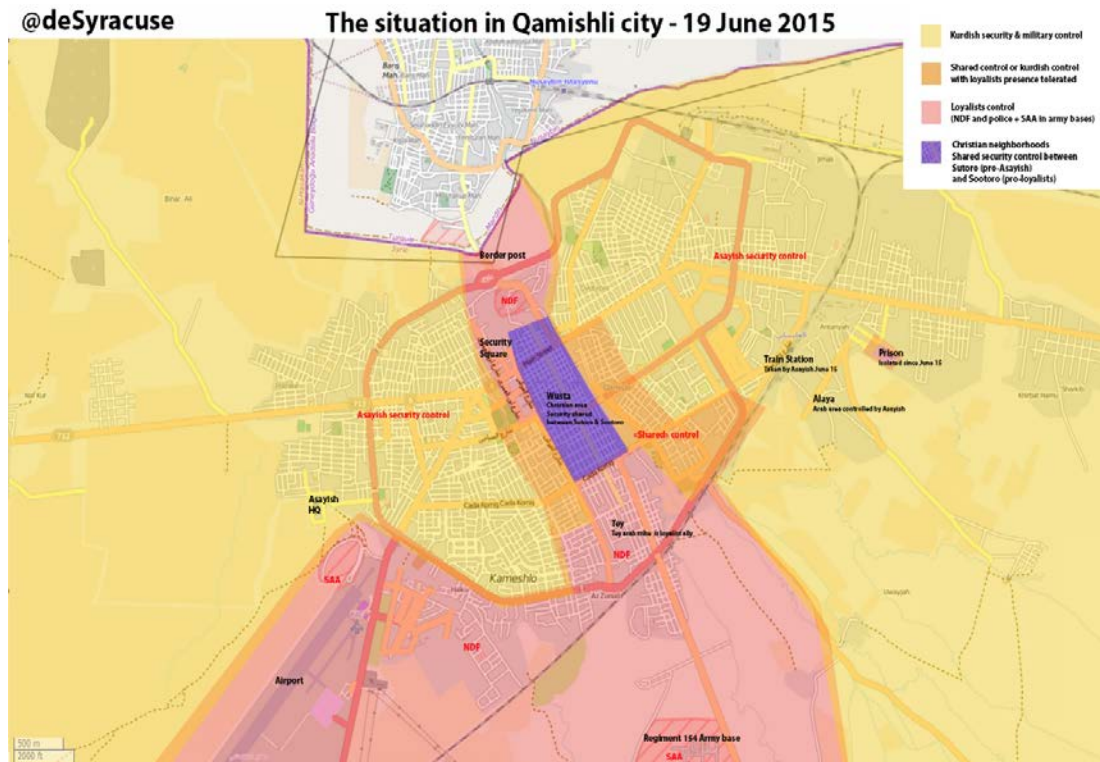


The map (**Map: Energy Production in Syria**) shows the importance of oil in Rojava. Today this area is exploiting in cooperation with the Syrian state oil company. The Kurds take 35% of the benefits. The Shammar take 10% (Arab tribe) as the oil field is on their territory, and also there is a little money for the Arab tribe who control and protect the pipeline. They made this deal in July when Raqqa was surrounded and all this territory was controlled by the SDF and SAA. Last October, the SDF took the Omar oil field (50% of Syrian production). Likely to have a similar agreement to share the oil. PYD and the Syrian government are not enemies; they are *dealing* since the beginning. Since 2014, the Syrian government gave weapons to the Kurds against ISIS after the Kurds got weapons from the US. But they are ready to move on the other side if the US withdraws or don't protect them against Turkey, or if they have no interest in staying with the Syrian government. So to define the PYD as a party – there is no freedom, strong ideology, there are pictures of Ocalan everywhere. It is a Kurdish PKK branch in Syria, basically ruling the area.

5.2 Qamishli

In Qamishli, before the war it was about 300,000 people, now with the IDPs, that is double. When you arrive in Qamishli you have this door/gate and pictures of the YPG and Ocalan, and the martyrs killed in the war. There are 5,000 Kurds who have been killed since 2012 – an enormous number. There are 1.5 million Kurds in the area, half are children, - so proportionally, 5,000 is an enormous number of young Kurdish fighters killed. If you compare

to the KRG in Iraq, it is 6 million people – the war with Daesh resulted in the loss of 2,000 fighters. So in relative terms, it is a high loss in Rojava. Also, 80% of Qamishli is informal settlement because the Syrian government never took this area into consideration, it was an internal settlement just producing wheat, oil, cotton – no industry. It was prohibited to have industry in this area (strategically) because the Syrian government did not want development in this area but they wanted the Kurds to move. This area was left underdeveloped. The suq/market of Qamishli has everything, but you need money to pay. Wages are about 20-30 dollars per month. One kilo of tomatoes is a dollar; one kilo of potatoes is 80 cents; one kilo of chicken is about 5 dollars, so you work one week and you can buy one chicken. Many people have money from abroad because many young people are in Europe and they send back money to their family to help them survive. Those without anyone on the outside of Syria are in a bad situation. This is also why it is not a problem from the YPG to recruit – when the YPG propose \$200 per month that is 10 times the salary of a civil servant in the Rojava administration, if you even have a chance to get such a job in the administration. So the city of Qamishli is divided in three parts divided between Kurdish control, shared control (Kurdish and loyalist), loyalist control, Christian neighbourhoods, and SAA controlled areas; there is a regime area including around the airport, the administrative city has the municipal offices close to the border with Turkey, and, there is a Christian neighbourhood (Wusta)– which is a little bigger and had 20% of the population who were Christian. There is a Christian militia (Sutoro) there who controls that area. There are two Sootoro forces: The Sootoro is a Christian militia that is pro-regime/pro-loyalist and there is a Sutoro which is with the Kurds (pro-Asayish). In Hasakah, for example, the Sutoro are with the Kurds but there it is not a Christian militia – in Hasakah you have less than 10% of Sutoro are Christian and 90% are Arab muslim. I visited the branch in Hasakah and most were Arab Sunni – they prefer to be in the Sotoro than in the YPG because in the Sotoro you are less on the front line and more on checkpoints and are not as much at risk. But the Kurds pretend that they are Christian militia that are with them, but this isn't completely true. The formal city area of Qamishli (20-25%) is one part of the Christian area; it is under Kurdish control, but because we are in the Christian/Arab area of Qamishli you can see the portraits of Syrian army martyrs. Qamishli is very different from one neighbourhood to the next, with Christian and Syriac churches. In 2015, there were many attacks in the Christian neighbourhoods; the Kurds say it was Daesh, but it not Daesh, it was the PYD putting bombs in the area to push Christians to stop supporting the regime and stop claiming Kurds were oppressing them. In February 2016, Asayish tried to take control of the Christian neighbourhoods and there were big clashes between Asayish and Sotoro. And when a Christian sotoro was killed, there was a strong anti-Kurdish feeling in the Christian areas.



Map: The situation in Qamishli (Agathocle de Syracuse www.agathocledesyracuse.com)

This is a border of the Sootoro control in the city; so you don't have checkpoints like on the governmental side and Kurdish side – the Asayish and the Kurdish militias don't enter the neighbourhood, but the civilians can enter easily – the checkpoints are not heavily guarded, but they just mark the border with some pots to show the border. The Arab tribes are working with the Kurds – you have the Shammar who have a militia (the Sanadel militia), and they are 5,000 strong – the chief of the Shammar is the Vice President of Cezire Canton; an important man and he is very close to the Kurds. His brother in Qamishli is living in the regime area of Qamishli and there you have the portrait of Bashar Al Assad and support for him; he doesn't support the Kurds, but he has no problem with his brother. So, within the same tribe, within the same family, you can have one with the Kurds, one who supports the regime, and the other who is with the Syrian opposition. This is the idea of not putting your eggs in the same basket; you don't know what will happen in future, so, if the regime comes back, there will be the link between the Shammar and the regime and vice versa – the tribe is therefore protecting their interests. You cannot buy a tribe you can only rent a tribe. A tribe is working for its own interest – today the Kurds are the leader so they deal with that; they are very patient, but on the other hand, they don't want to live under Daesh or Kurdish authority. You can imagine when Daesh now is nearly finished that the tensions between Arabs and Kurds is going to grow.

You have this new administration of Rojava. The base of the new administration is the commune (communad, neighbourhood council – like a village level council) – each council has about 1,000 people and is named after a *Shaheed*/martyr. There is a council of the commune of about 6 people; you have always women and Arabs who are part of those. In the room of the council you have the portrait of the local martyrs from the neighbourhood. In each administration, in each commune I visited, you have someone who doesn't speak Arabic. I was able to speak Arabic everywhere, but in each place there are some people in the administration who do not speak Arabic; it means he is possibly not Syrian – he is from Turkey,

he is from the PKK, likely). There is someone from the PKK in each administration to control everything.

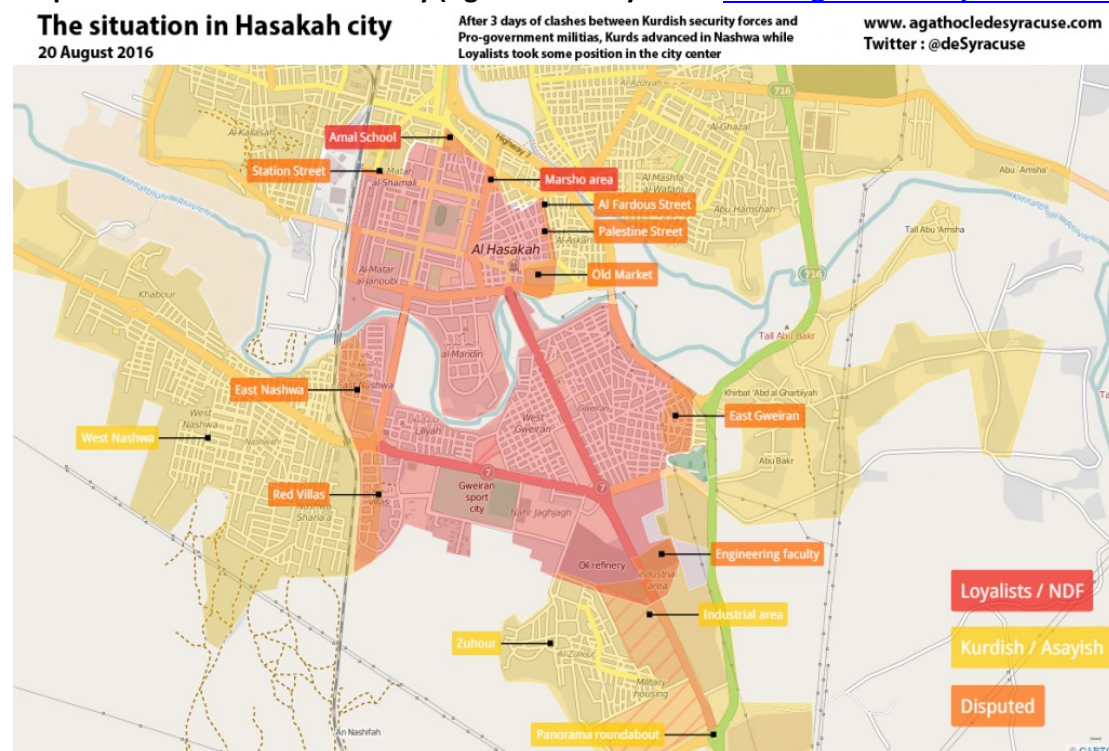
Lal il hijrah al watan watanna - “Don’t immigrate, the country is all of ours” – This is a painted mural you can see in the area.

They are very conscious in Rojava that the main problem is immigration because young people leave due to the bad economic situation; they don’t want to join the YPG and go to the front line so they try to escape, and also for political reasons – if you don’t want to follow the PYD line and you don’t want to stay in this area, you have no job opportunities. I meet many doctors in Erbil and Dohuk who left Rojava because they were earning only 50\$ per month. In Rojava, if you need surgery or to see a doctor, your only option is to go to Damascus. That’s also why the Kurds do not want to fight the regime around the Qamishli airport to take control of it because if they do that the population will be very angry because they will lose access to Damascus for medical services. There are Ocalan images everywhere. When you visit the PYD headquarters in Qamishli, there is also an image of Che Guevara, as many leftists and foreign delegations visit and they want to give a ‘good impression’. It is only in the PYD headquarters you see that, not in the commune or administration. It is only in this place for public relations. They want to show that they are promoting women’s equality, not ‘PKK terrorists’ like the Turkish claim they are so they put forward the progressive image but they are tied to PKK.

5.3 Hasakah

I also visited Hasakah (**Map: The Situation in Hasakahh City, 20 August 2016**). Hasakah is the same situation as in Qamishli, you have the regime in the centre with the market and main administration. In spring 2016 here was a huge battle between the Kurds and the regime and the regime lost the neighbourhood south of the river but it is the same situation as Qamishli, but the regime area in Hasakah is just smaller.

Map: The situation in Hasakah City (Agathocle de Syracuse www.agathocledesyracuse.com)



After that I have been to Tal Tamer, where I also visited Assyrian villages. These Assyrian villages were taken by Daesh in winter 2015. Daesh destroyed all the churches in the villages and the population fled: 35,000 Assyrians are now less than 1,000. Everyone has fled. I spoke a lot to the Assyrian Father of Tel Tamer, where you have an Assyrian minority, and he told me that they will not want to come back because they are afraid, and they have not been supported by the local population. The Arab villages, Daesh took them, they say the Kurds were waiting for Daesh to clean the Christians out the area and then they take the the land and then they will steal everything.

The main problem for Rojava is the land problem. It is a good area for agriculture but you need irrigation. In the 2001-2009 drought, this area lost 35-40% of cultivatable land due to lack of water. There is no dam, there is only irrigation with well. There is a reduction of agricultural land in the Rojava, but increase in the area around Euphrates. We need water, the Arabs have water, we have fought Daesh, why give the water to the Arabs? They have in mind to build a system to take water from the Euphrates to irrigate the land. You can see the water problem will be a major problem between Kurds and Arabs. The other problem is in Hasakah – the agrarian reform has stopped because of Hafez Assad in the 1970s. Land here was not redistributed as it was in other parts of Syria. The state kept the land and rented the land to the former land owners. You still have in Hasakah the majority of the agricultural population are landless. It is the Kurdish peasants who are the ones without land. It is the social base of the PYD and the YPG - they give their sons for the construction of Rojava. Now they want land. However the PYD administration of Rojava says they don't want to make any agreement on land reform during the wartime because it will create problems between Kurds and Arabs. The Rojava administration started in 2017 to rent for free 5 hectares to the poor family. For the moment the administration distribute only the former State land. When redistribution time will come, the Arab tribes will not be so happy. The chief of the Shammar has thousands and thousands of acres. It is sure that the Kurds will take land from him and redistribute it to the Kurds. Probably they won't take too much from the Shammar because he is VP and they are working closely with them, but from other tribes like the Tays, who have repressed the Kurds in 2004 it will another treatment. That is why the Tay tribe is trying to work more closely with the SDF now.

I don't know when they are going to start land reform but there is a huge demand from the Kurds, but it would create a lot of problems, potentially like ethnic cleansing in the area. In conclusion, Daesh is only now in small pockets in Iraq and now the problems will grow between Arabs and Kurds. The question is how many month the US army will stay in the area. I think the US is in an uncomfortable position in Rojava. Today, Turkey is not anymore an enemy of the Syrian regime because of the Kurdish issue. There is huge pressure from Turkey on the US to force them to leave the area. Russia and Iran are also not happy to see US troops in the area. Because of the tension between Arab and Kurd and economic problems of the area, if the US troops want to stay they have to rebuild Raqqa and rebuild a kind of Marshall Plan for this area. I don't think this is in the mind of the current administration in the US to invest in the Rojava region. The future is not very clear but there will certainly be problems between Arabs and Kurds, and that the PYD will stay. It is not in the interest of Putin to see Erdogan destroy the PYD. But the new generation of PYD is ready to fight.

5.4 Question and Answer

What is the situation in Rojava regarding YPG recruitment?

In YPG you have 9 months obligatory military service for everyone who reaches 18 years. But people are joining the YPG also voluntarily because it is to earn \$200 per month and you are on the winner's side. Many Arabs are joining the YPG because this question of land reform is in everyone's mind in Rojava and if you want to keep your land and to have land, it's better to be in the winning camp than the losing one. To belong to the YPG gives you power and because today there is no more fight to be against Daesh now, being in YPG is more in fashion.

Can you tell us more about the civil service and administration of the Rojava area? What do Arabic teachers do?

In Qamishli, you have many Arabs schools that were closed because they refused to introduce the Kurdish curriculum. For example, 80 primary schools were closed by the Kurds. And since September 2017, they are imposing the Kurdish curriculum in secondary schools. Only Christian private schools are exempted but every 6 months there is huge pressure on the private schools to teach in Kurdish. So now in Qamishli, the Kurdish administration just allow the Christians to go to the Christian schools, and they don't want the Arabs or the Kurds going there. In Qandil, there is a lot of corruption of course, this is the law. You still have Arab schools but the money is from the Syrian government in Damascus. When you had protests this summer in Hasakah about the Kurdification of the teaching, you had four days of protests and what happened? – car bombs from Daesh (or probably by PYD claiming it was Daesh) – protests ended. This was a message from the PYD to Arab protesters.

Are passports and family books issued in the area? Are documents issued by the Kurdish administration only valid in northern Syria?

Yes, the Kurdish administration started to give papers to people - issue birth and wedding certificates and driving licenses, etc. It is valid in the Kurdish Rojava area. But at the same time, people will ask for birth certificates and other documents from the Syrian administration. So you make double registrations so you have both Kurdish and Arab certificates because the Kurdish ones are not recognised by the Syrian government.

What is the administrative relationship of the PYD with the regime in Aleppo's Kurdish neighbourhoods?

The YPG control Sheikh Maqsood neighbourhood and Ashrafyeh neighbourhood in the northern area of Aleppo – the Syrian police and army don't enter this area. How viable is this arrangement? We don't know. When the Syrian regime will be strong enough to retake Idlib, and the NW area – the arrangement will be over. The Syrian government will never let the YPG control a part of Aleppo. A part of Afrin, a part of Kobane or Qamishli is more tolerable to let the YPG control a part, but not Aleppo – that is not possible. So maybe in one year or two we will see this arrangement change in Aleppo but it depends on the battlefield.

Is the term 'Rojava' recognised and used by all parties in the conflict in the area?

Rojava, officially, is not the official term for the area – it is now the 'Northern Federation' since December 2016. They changed it from Rojava because Rojava is too Kurdish and they have already expanded onto Arab territory and they say they want to have a multicultural, multisectoral country. So they don't officially use Rojava anymore, but everyone speaks about it when to talk to people – even the administration. But they have to give a different image. This is the term used by the Kurds – the Arabs or others, they say the 'Kurdish administration', they say the 'local administration'. Rojava is a Kurdish term. Poor people follow the PYD. They

want to stay because they can't move. The Kurdish middle class, who are more in favour of the KDP(KDP, Kurdish Democratic Party), they prefer to move. The Arabs – it depends on your political means and social situation, but even the people who are supporting PYD, if they have the chance to move, they will, but you need money. The Christians left; they want to leave because they see no opportunity for them to stay and they feel that they are in danger and because they have networks outside it is easier for them to move.

What is your impression of the number of people in the Kurdish area who cannot read/write Arabic?

Very few – at the time of the Baathist regime you had schools everywhere and the children were forced to go to school. You have illiterate Syrian in the Arab and the Kurdish communities but very. The old people who have not been to school, of course – the women who have stayed home – they don't speak much Arabic. But for the young people who are in the forties, say, nearly everybody speaks Arabic or is able to understand. I don't know if they are able to write Arabic. Of course the Kurdish children left school early at around 10 to help their parents, or because it is Arabic and they can't understand, or because of large class sizes of 60, they maybe preferred to leave the school and to work instead. But they are able to understand Arabic. It's not like in Iraq where you have the young generation who don't speak Arabic anymore because since 25 years all the teaching is in Kurdish, so people under 40 they don't speak Arabic so much but in Syria it's not the same situation.

Arabs who were born and raised in Kurdish areas – can they speak Kurdish?

Yes. At home they would speak Kurdish in Kurdish areas. But in Damascus, for instance, Kurdish people don't speak Kurdish in Kurdish areas there.

Do you have any information about women being forced to join the YPJ under threat of harm (i.e. not talking about the social pressure)?

They don't force women to join the YPJ (popular protection units for women); it is on a voluntary basis that they join this militia. The women are not so exposed to frontline fire as the men. Only 2% of those killed are women – only 2% of the YPG/YPJ killed are women. The women who join the YPJ, they join very early – they are 14 or 15 years of age– or some of them belong to an all-PKK family where it is a family tradition. Other times the Arab women who want to escape the social pressure who join.

What is the percentage of Arab fighters in the SDF and how do see that affecting the situation in Rojava?

The SDF, the US Centcom says there are 50,000 fighters (31 August 2017) in it. The YPG they are 25-30,000. Among the YPG you have 20% who are Arab. Why do they join? The salary. Also, there is more discipline in the YPG and they are not under the control of the tribal chief. The Arab groups who join the SDF – like Raqqa, or the military council of Manbij, for example – they are tribal groups. So the tribal chief is the head of the militia. You have some Arabs who want to escape this tribal structure, or they are in trouble with the chief. It is a means to escape from the social hierarchy of the Arab tribes and to have a kind of promotion through the YPG. You have about 15 Arab groups in the SDF. The YPG don't encourage the unification of these Arab groups because they prefer to have 15 smaller ones than one united group. The Shammar is probably the strongest Arab group and are very close to the Kurds – they are located close to Qamishli. The problem is with the Arab groups who are far from the core

areas of the Kurds (Raqqa and Deirezzour). In Deirezzour especially, for example, you have new Arab groups here joining the Kurds and SDF – and these Arab groups were very corrupted – they were with the Free Syrian Army, after they have been with Daesh, and now they are with the SDF because they want to be on the winning side, and they only want to be there for the power and the money. The Kurds don't want this. They want more discipline. The Arabs don't want to be ruled by the Kurds. They fight with the Kurds against Daesh because they want to be on the winner side, which is the best to stay on their lands showing their loyalty to the new master. They do not want to be expelled from their land – Tel Abyad is a big hotspot in this regard. However, most of the Arabs are in the SDF now only for the salary (140 to 200 \$/month), the only source of income for many young men.

In Ras al-Ayn, it is more Kurdish. The problem in this area is around the former 'Arab Belt'. You have people who have moved from Assad Lake to this area and they built this 'Arab Belt' area – until now the Kurds haven't retaken the land. Originally it was Kurdish land that was stolen, but the Kurds have not retaken it, though the Kurdish population want to retake it. The allegiance of these Arabs is more to the Assad regime in this area. You have many Arab refugees in Ourfa area who are militarily organised by the Turks for the 'coming back' of these refugee Arabs to the area supported by Turkey – because the Turks want to take Tel Abyad – it is a weak point - 75% of the population is Arab. The Turks want to do here what they did in Al Bab – they want to break the continuity between Kobane and Qamishli.

When this 9 months of military service in the YPG is over, what do they do?

They go home, if they survive. Or if they stay, they continue.

The regime will not let the Kurds take Aleppo, but the Kurds claim Aleppo.

When you speak with the Kurds about Aleppo there is an ambiguity because it is an Arab city, but there is **Sheikh Maqsood** (Kurdish controlled part of Aleppo)...no they don't really think to take Aleppo. But they would like to have a special status for **Sheikh Maqsood** to keep the authority in the neighbourhood. Because when you see on the map of the Kurdish population – Afrin is nearly 100% Kurd, but then you have other areas that are Arab, basically. They cannot pretend to go south of Afrin. Around Kobane and Qamishli, you have mixed areas. At the south of Afrin, you have a gap – there is an ethnic border – very clear. The Arab refugees from Tal Abyad are ready to come back and are supported by the Turkish military and are just waiting for the US troops to leave the area. They are ready to intervene in Tel Abyad.

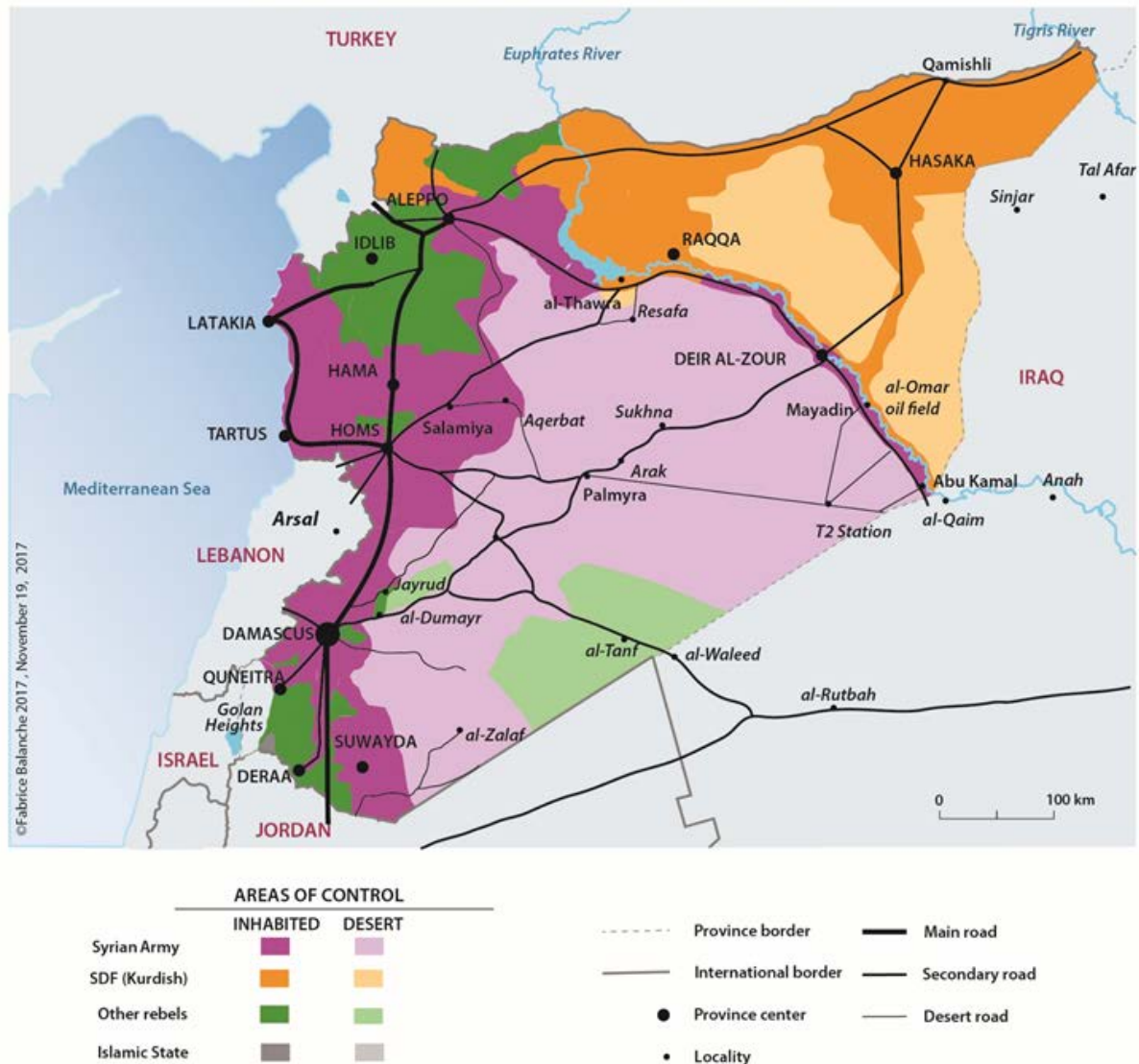
Turks cannot accept the Kurds having Afrin, as it is seen as a PKK stronghold. We have seen when the Turks said that they can't accept it that the Russians moved in and established bases there. So it seems they might be using it as a bargaining chip with the Turks. What is your take on this?

The Kurds are hostages between the Turks and Russians. Why did Erdogan join the Russian coalition in August 2016? Because he understands that the US is reinforcing the Kurds with their presence, so he switched his allegiance to Putin, who let him to invade Jarablus and Al Bab. Erdogan enter in Bab al Hawa, at the same time he kept Hayat Tahrir al Sham under control because the Syrian army needs peace in the West. It was a bargain. What is the bargain between Erdogan and Putin? It is about Idlib, of course. You help me clean Idlib, and I give you something in Afrin – Tal Abyad, or...it is this kind of game... the Russians are in Afrin to show to the Kurds that they can protect them against Erdogan; they are smart with Damascus. If the Kurds stay with the Americans, Putin will say to Erdogan, ok, do what you want with them. Erdogan also is dealing with Trump – yesterday the Pentagon said 400 US soldiers withdrew

from Raqqa, that they will not give anymore weapons to the Kurds...and the message is very important – at the same time the US says they want to stay in the area until 2021 (presidential election), because they want to push the Russians to remove Assad. It's the plan, but who knows if it will work. They want to block the Iranian corridor which is why the US wants to stay. But if Erdogan can get what he wants without using force – to get the YPG to leave and go out of Afrin....but if they refuse, you can have a limited Turkish intervention in Afrin. At this level, we don't know what is the deal between the US, Turks, and Russia. Tal Abyad is not negotiable because the Arab refugees are ready to return with the Turkish army supporting them. They are ready to intervene in Tal Abyad. Manbij – in the Turkish area between Azaz and Jarablus there is electricity, health, development to show that under Turkish occupation life is good and normal. The Kurdish occupation leads to a bad economic situation – by this soft power, Erdogan tries to influence the Arabs to expel the Kurds. Some Kurds are ready to make sacrifices to build Rojava, the Kurdish state, but the Arabs are not ready to do this for a Kurdish project. Erdogan, if not by force, tries to push the Kurds from Manbij by this soft power.

6. Socio-economic aspects of the conflict (F. Balanche)

Military Situation in Syria: December, 2017

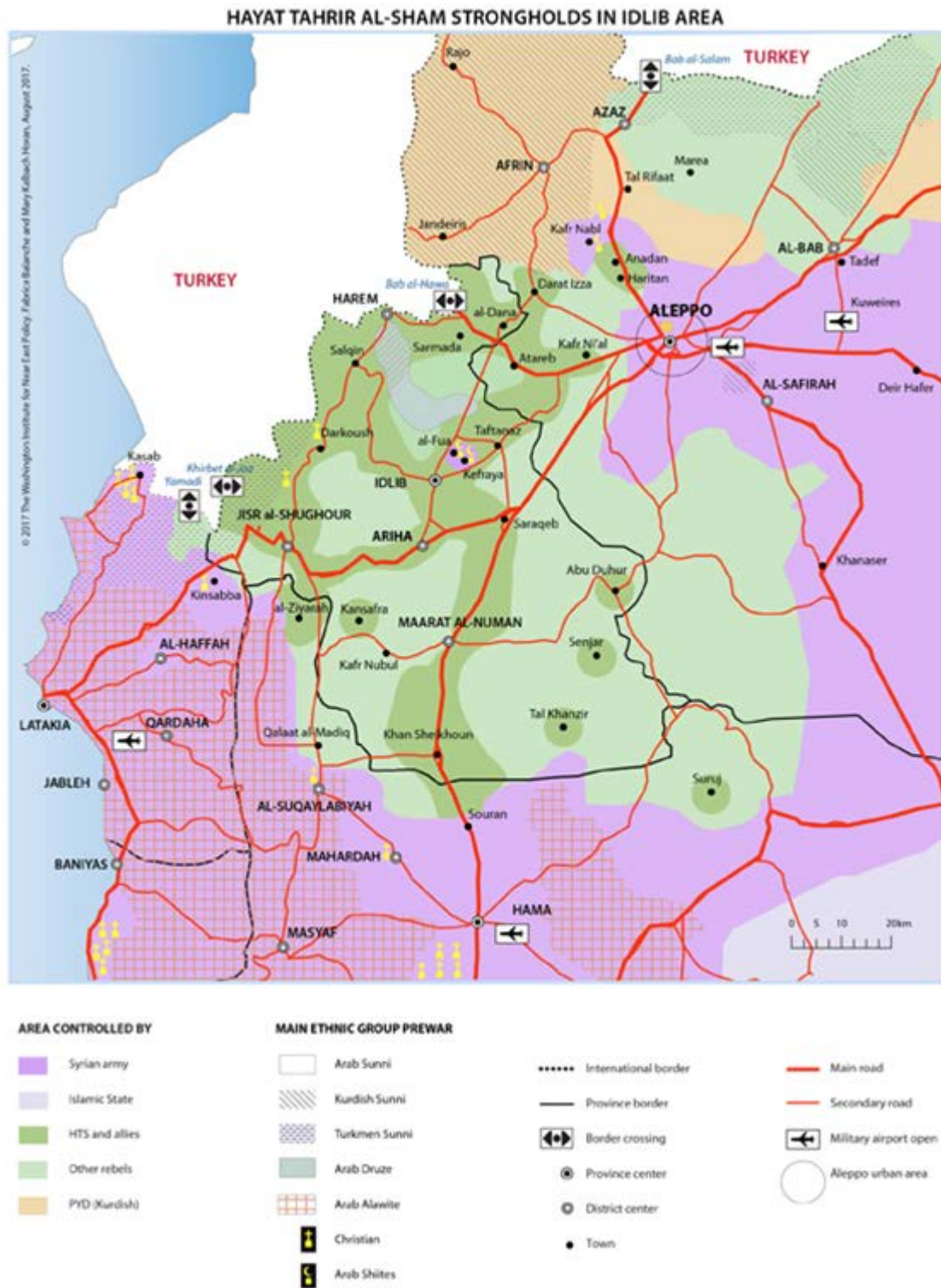


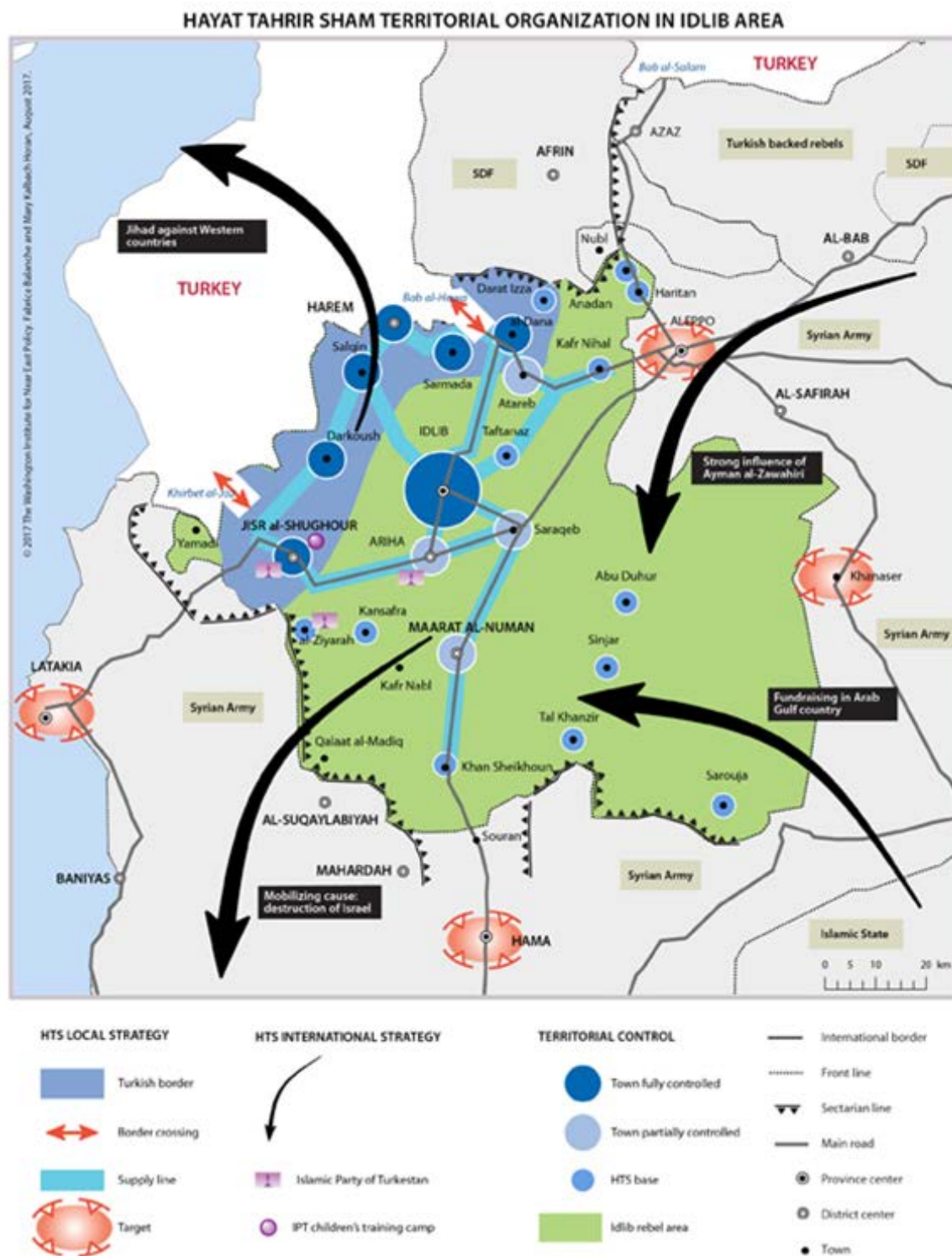
There are many different territories divided between forces (**Map: Military Situation in Syria: December 2017**) –territories divided among Kurds, regime area, rebel areas. Inside each area, there are smaller areas that are controlled too – at each checkpoint you have to give money at each checkpoint you pass through. Life is very difficult - there is no unified market. Reconstruction will be slow. I visited the regime areas in March 2016 – I try to go every year to Syria both to regime and Rojava areas (not the rebel area). I also made interviews with Syrian refugees in Lebanon to see to what extent refugees feel they want to return to Syria or not – the answer so far has been no due to the security situation, economic and political situations. Information on the economic situation today is virtually impossible to collect. The most important data are 13 million people in need on 17 million people reside in Syria; 7 million refugees outside Syria (5.5 million according to UNHCR) – all detailed in the last OCHA report.

Thirty percent of the territory is in SDF (Kurdish) control but it is only 3 million people. On the regime side you have 11.5 million people – most of the IDPs are in these areas actually. I did

interviews with IDPs from Ghouta. Ghouta was bombed so they went to Damascus because it is a safer area, not because they love Assad. It is a strategy of the regime to destroy infrastructure in the rebel areas to prove to people that the rebels cannot provide security to people. It is counter-insurgency strategy. It is what happened in Ghouta very clearly. They use starvation to push people to leave the area to separate civilians from fighters and then destroy the fighters who remain. It is a strategy used by the regime.

The main problem will be Idlib soon (**Map: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham Strongholds in Idlib Area**). In dark green you see the HTS areas and their allies. On the map you see that they are controlling the border, meaning they are controlling the humanitarian aid, they control smuggling, weapons and munitions. They are the masters of this area because the other rebel groups cannot get any support through from outside. HTS is also controlling the main road and can then control the whole province and economic life, taking taxes on goods and individuals traveling on the road network. HTS like Daesh – they are basically the same – though HTS is less efficient – they have the same strategy to build a caliphate as a territorial ‘statelet’ and for that need money to reduce the influence of other groups and to clientalise the population. They try to threaten Hama and Aleppo. There have been fights there with the Syrian army – but for not the SAA is more in a containment strategy towards HTS than roll back. The rollback will come after the situation in the east is finished. This area has about 60,000 fighters in the region – 20,000 of which are with HTS.

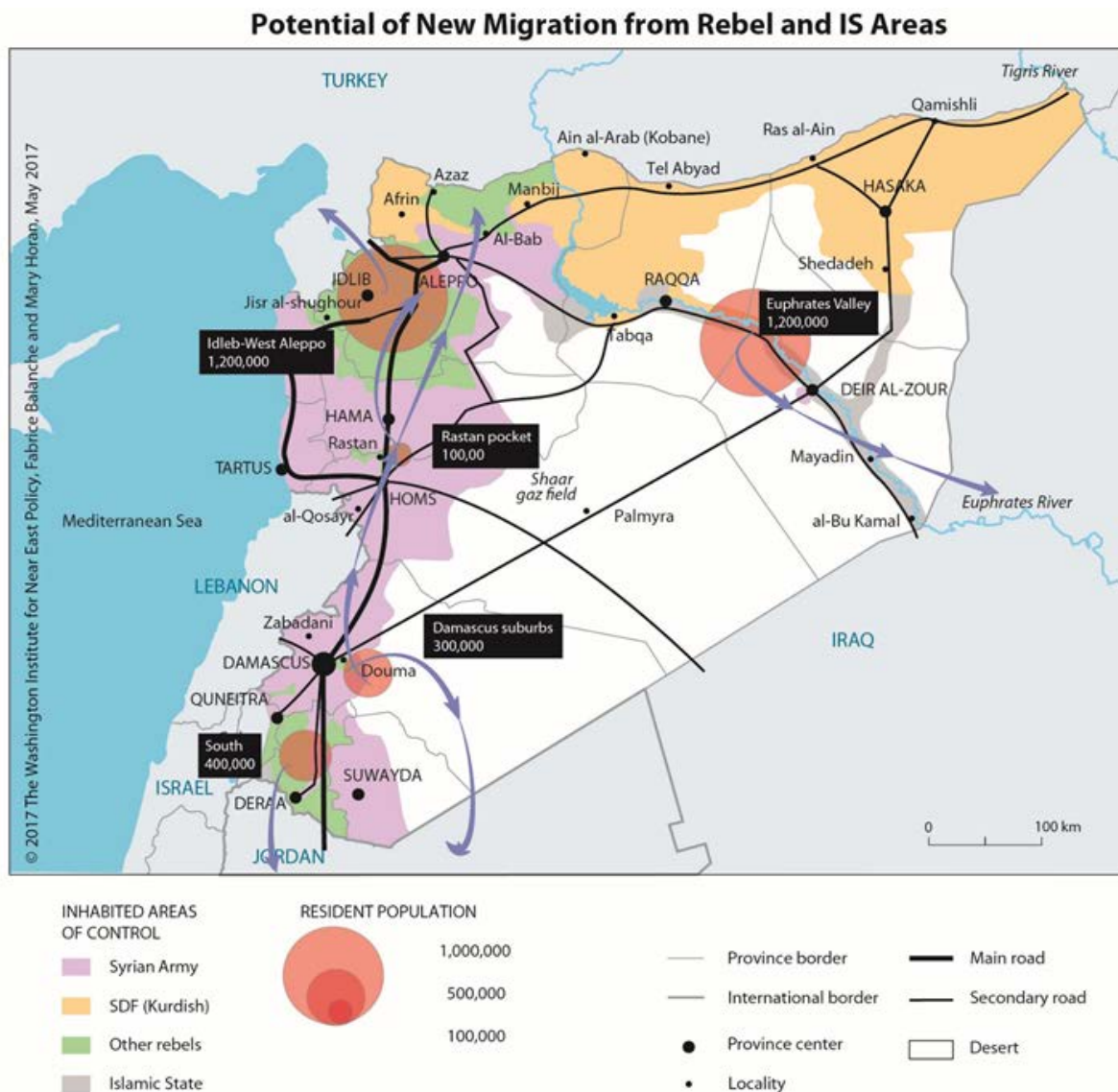


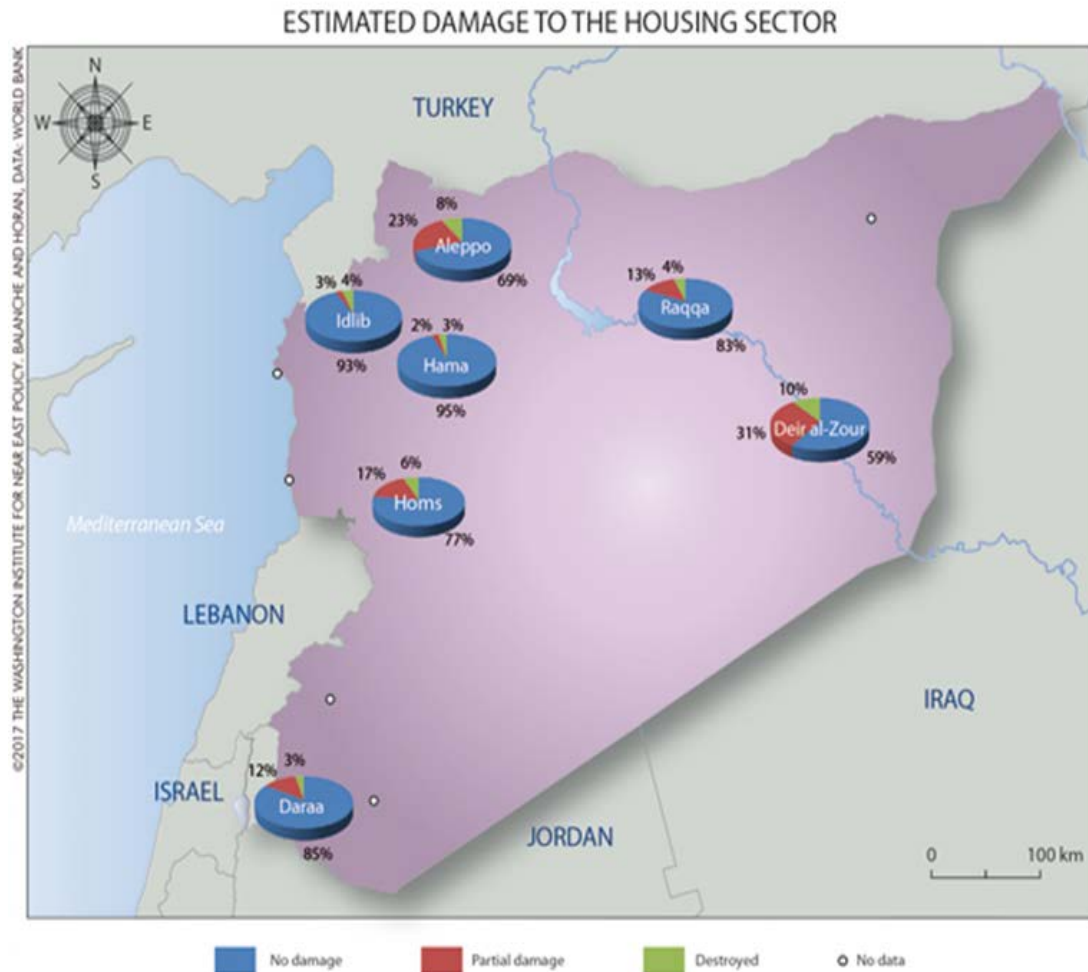


It is quieter due to the agreement between Russia and the US and Jordan for a de-escalation zones because it is close to the Golan Heights and very sensitive. I don't think in this region you will see large fights between the Syrian regime and the rebels because of the proximity of Israel. You have some small pockets of fighting. It is clear that the regime will take the area east of Deraa – that is clear – because it is the road with Jordan and it is important to re-open the road to Jordan for the economic relationship and for the symbolic opening of the road up to Turkey. The regime wants to reopen the connection between Turkey and Jordan to obtain royalties from the traffic – this is important for their income streams. They need to control

the roads and checkpoints for this income. This is very important now that Syria is divided up by many warlords who want a piece of the cake. For reconstruction it will be a problem because even if Syria is reunified under the regime, there will be divisions between many chiefs who will control their small areas, like in Lebanon. They don't allow you to invest without giving them a share.

So there is still potential for migration (**Map: Potential for New Migration from Rebel and IS Areas**) in the area. In Deraa you have about 400,000 people under rebel control; in Ghouta it's about 300,000; In Idlib, 1.2 million by my data (2 million is an over-evaluation); in the Euphrates area between Raqqa and Abu Kamal you have about 1.2 million people.

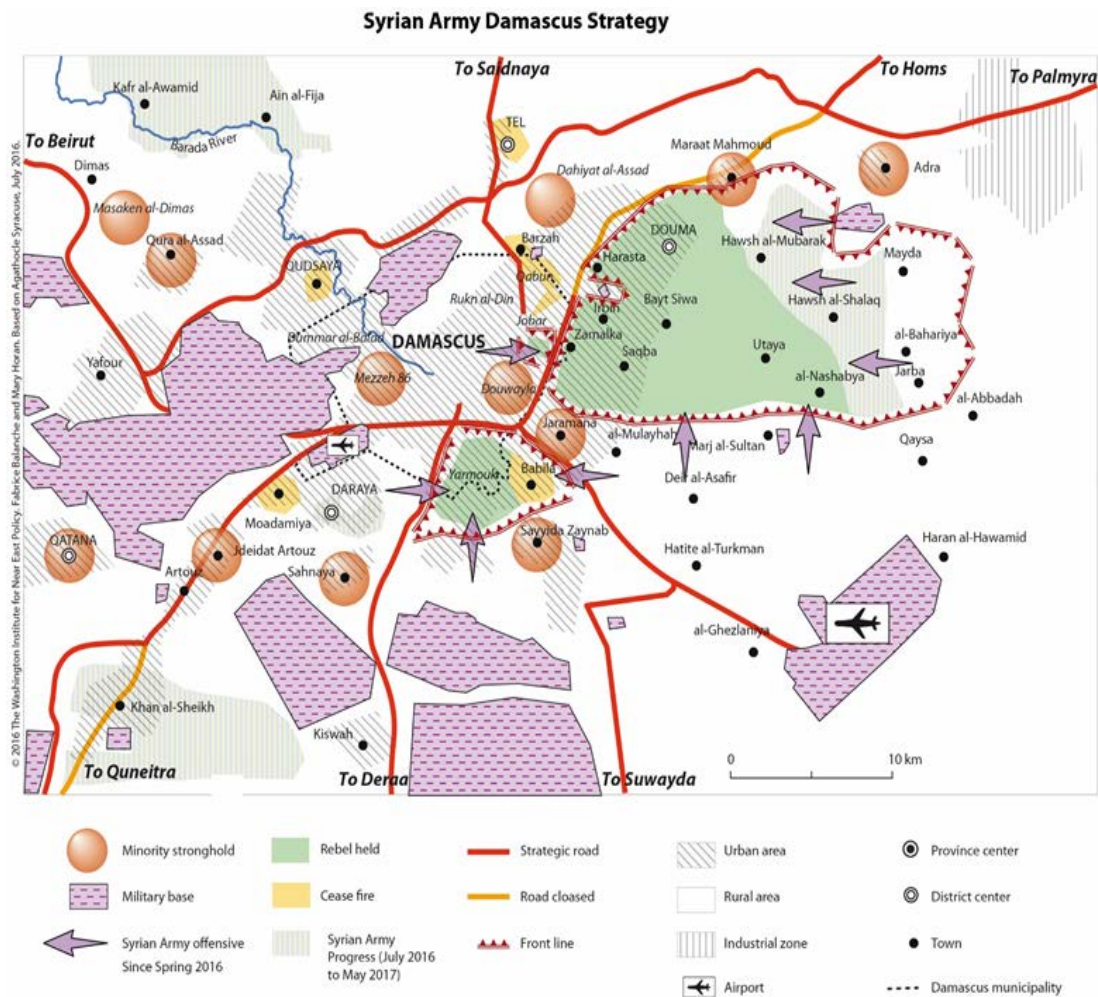




Potential migration related to the security situation – destruction in the cities is very serious (Map: **Estimated Damage to the Housing Sector**). I made this map before the destruction of Raqqqa – half of that city is now destroyed. The most destroyed city at the time of this map (July 2017) was in Deirezzor – half of that city was destroyed. One third to 25% of Aleppo was destroyed. The northern part of Syria has been most destroyed; more so than the south and the west. There is a kind of US blockage on aid for reconstruction happening until Russia decides to remove Assad. If there is no international reconstruction for Homs and Damascus, Syria and Russia will be unlikely to allow reconstruction funds to go to the North of Syria, to help the Kurds. Raqqqa for instance will be blocked too. The Kurds will not be happy to see Raqqqa reconstructed (which supported Daesh) versus Kobane and Hasakah (who supported the fight against Daesh) – they will not be happy with that. Corruption is an overall blockage for reconstruction across Syria. According to Transparency International, it is 173 out of 176 in its level of corrupt countries in the world. Every checkpoint requires payment. I met a woman from Aleppo in Lebanon and she wanted to see her flat – she had to pay \$100 from the Lebanese border into Aleppo – paying \$1 at every checkpoint. I brought milk and tea for my family in my suitcase and when I arrived – it was empty. Before entering Syria you have to be checked against the blacklist of the government. If your name is on the list you go directly to prison. So before you arrive at the border, a person must pay someone, to pay someone, to verify on the computer if your name appears on the list. Even if your name is not on the list, they put you in jail – the Mukhabarat (intelligence services) – they have full power to do so. And if they know you are coming from Lebanon, they will think you have money, and they will still put you in jail just to pressure your family to pay a ransom to release you. If they

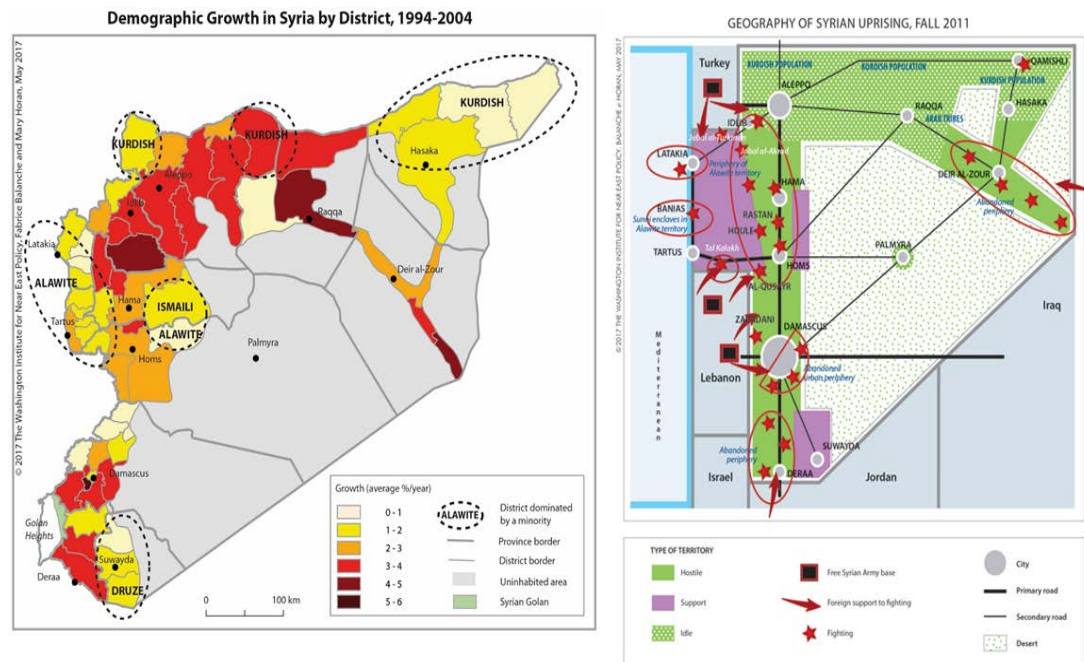
know you have someone in Europe or the Gulf, they will charge even more. Huge corruption and insecurity in this regard is not good for the economy. There is no job creation. The state creates jobs for widows, families of martyrs, injured soldiers, to give a salary for survival but the industry sector has been destroyed in many places. Some industry has been rebuilt but only for the internal market. Most large industrialists have gone to Turkey or Egypt. Others outside Syria smuggle in and out of Syria and run business that way. Aleppo will never come back to how it was in 2011 with a strong industrial base. Today you have some people coming back to make real estate bargains if they are close to the regime. Economic sanctions have destroyed small businesses but have reinforced the wealthy business men close to Assad – they make business smuggling on the black market for sugar, etc. A small group close to the regime then finance pro-regime militias. The regime is also planning some long term reconstruction projects. For example, that will result in displacing the people who once lived there but left in the conflict. See **Map: Syrian Army Damascus Strategy** - the destruction of the informal settlement in Southern Damascus and in the Eastern Ghouta during the fighting is also a violent program of “urban renovation”.

What’s happening now is the creation of an Iranian corridor – this is a reality – Iran is projecting its power on Lebanon, Iraq, Syria – it is creating an economic market and for its military influence. Iran wants to integrate these economies, for instance, to interconnect the electricity network. This is also political. Electricity is a main problem for these countries and if Iran can resolve this problem this will increase their influence with the poor and Shia population. In Syria, after they retook the gasfield, the gas is going to the power stations, so in some areas you do have 24 hour electricity. This is also soft power for the regime – to show the population they can provide. There are very few power stations in the east of the country with small capacity; most power comes from the west. The power didn’t build the stations there to keep it underdeveloped.



Reconstruction will eventually focus on Damascus, Homs, where the Syrian diaspora with money might return – the Syrian state will not invest in the small cities or the countryside where warlords are located. One of the roots of the crisis was the return of the centre-periphery cleavage in the 1990s. In the 70s and 80s, there was more development in the rural areas but this stopped in the 1990s. With the liberalisation of the economy in the 2000s, Assad said – no more development of the countryside, no more regional planning – so, in the past decade there has been a wealth concentration in the main cities, abandonment of the ‘periphery’, and we have seen the uprising in Deraa – in the suburbs. There are huge socio-economic reasons for the Syrian uprising too – with the reconstruction we are also going to see this concentration of wealth and investment in main cities. The roots of the uprising will in my opinion be reinforced.

Demography is a time-bomb and we see the results after 20 years. The fertility rates show this –for example, demographic growth is about 3.5% per year in Raqqa - fertility rates are about 8 children per women in Raqqa. Moreover, Raqqa attracts population from the rural countryside. The Sunni belt has a very high fertility rate in Deraa and Damascus – when we compare with the geography of the Syrian uprising, we see the connection between the demography and uprising (**Maps: Demographic Growth in Syria by District and Geography of the Syrian Uprising**).



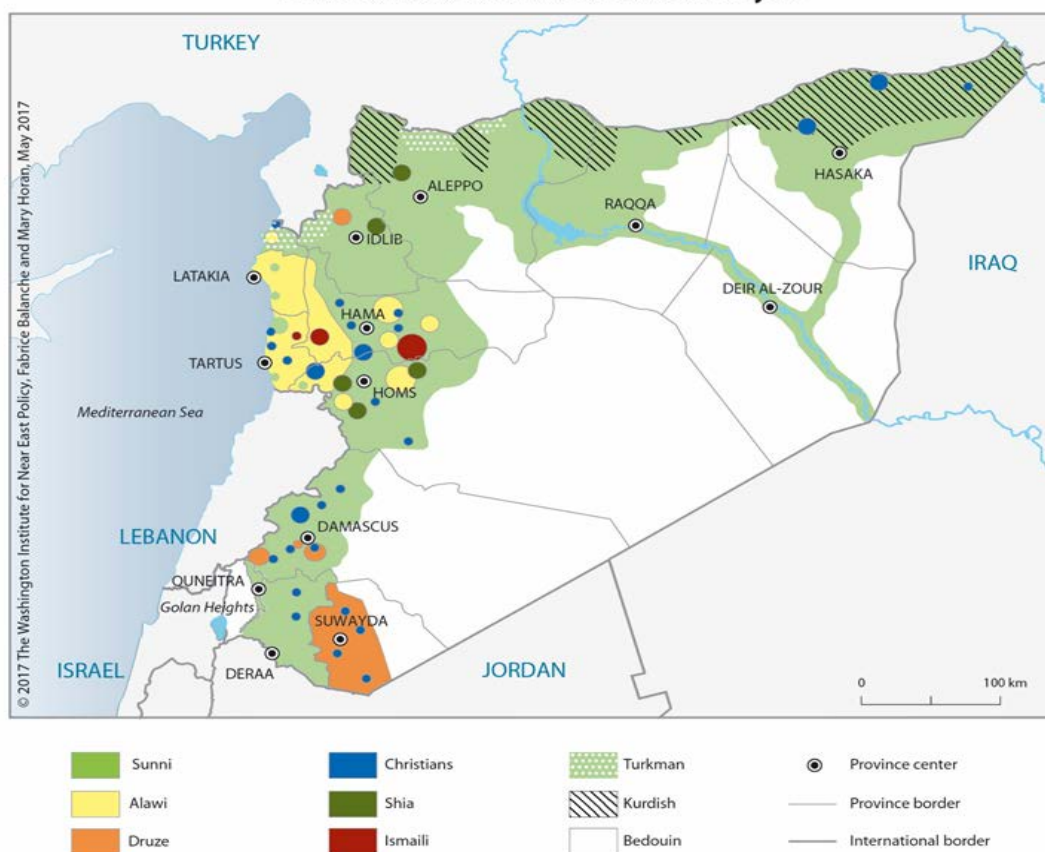
By the contrary, Alawites, the Ismaili, the Druze – these populations have a low demography rate – they have about 3 children per woman, while rural Sunnis still have about 6-7 each. For me it is no surprise that one of the strategies of the regime is to keep 6-7 million Sunni Arabs outside the country – because this population is too fertile and are threatening the weak demography of the minorities. Minorities were 30% in 1980, then 20% in 2011 – then the regime had difficulty to recruit new Mukhabarat, new forces, among the Alawites for example. So one of the solutions is to expel several million people – that's why you meet Syrian refugees in Lebanon – these people are coming from Tabkah, for example, and they don't want to go back to Syria. Even if they were not opponents – there is no possibility to come back. They live in bad conditions in Lebanon, but at least they can eat – they are unsure what they would do or if they would be welcomed back in Syria. I met some refugees, people from close to Idlib in HTS area, who would like to come back but with HTS there it isn't possible – they are waiting for the Syrian government to retake the area so they can return. There are many, many different situation. People from Bab Amer in Homs city – they will never come back – because they are on the blacklist of the regime. People from Al Qusayr will also never come back because they are blacklisted. These people were in the Sunni corner at the corner at the south of the Alawite stronghold, the Shia Mecca, across from the highway between Homs and Damascus - it was a stronghold of the revolt and a door for jihadists to enter Syria from Lebanon. Al Qusayr was completely destroyed when Hezbollah retook the city (Al Qusayr) and the population has been expelled, and for the people from Al Qusayr it is clear they cannot return to Syria. In Syria, I think Al Qusayr is an example of ethnic cleansing directed at the top of the regime in Damascus, and possibly due to an Iranian presence in the area. But in other places, ethnic cleansing is decided by the population themselves – for example, Qalat al Hosen (in French: Le Krak des Chevalier (Crusader Castel) in Idlib – close to the Christian valley of Wadi Nasara - here you have Christian and Alawite area but Qalat al Hosen is a Sunni village. This village supported the rebellion since the beginning and was taken by the rebels early on. It was also a point and base for jihadists going into Homs and you had many fights with the Christian militias and many civilians were killed by the rebels. So when the SAA retook the village and the castle in July 2014 with the help of the army and Christian militias, they burned the village. But it was not decided in Damascus. It was decided by the local population who decided that they did not want the local Sunni population coming back. We have many examples of local kinds of cleansing that will prevent some people from coming back. The regime is clearly willing to push out millions of people; Syria lost about 50% of its human

capital due to the war – intellectual elites, job creators, business people – all this is also a blockage for the reconstruction.

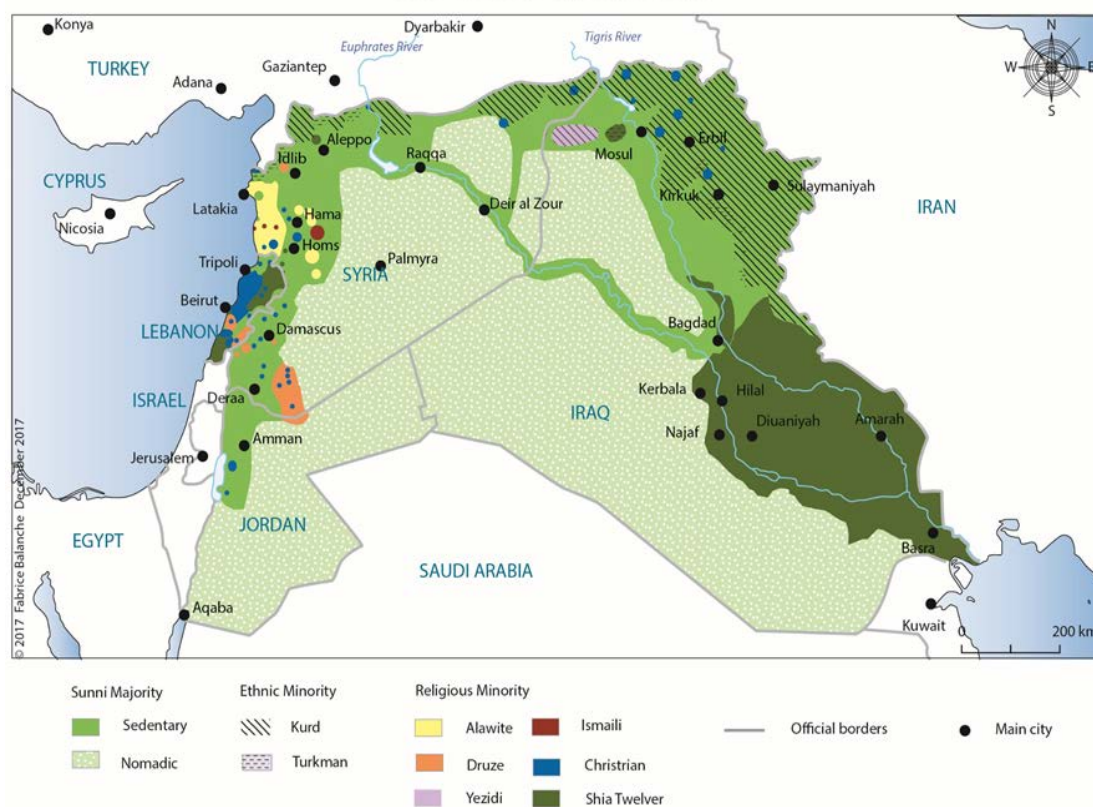
I don't expect a quick reconstruction of Syria – the US will block it, France will block it – and the regime will not accept political concessions for economic aid – there will likely be a lengthy continuation of the counter-insurgency so do not expect economic stabilisation to occur very soon or quickly. There are ethnic cleansing issues on both sides. There will be a redistribution of the land/properties of those who left the country to the people who are still in Syria and to those who have remained loyal to the government. They will become so loyal as a result, that refugees will not be welcomed back. I saw a law taken by Parliament taken last month – Syrians who are abroad and who have not done their military service have to pay \$8 000 USD if they don't want to have their family's property confiscated. Who, displaced into Lebanon, can pay \$8 000? It is to have a legal mechanism to steal this property and a mean to shake down money from those who have the money to pay. But it is also the case that you cannot just pay the \$8 000 to solve it – because although this is the 'official' price – it doesn't include all the *bakshish* (the bribes needed) – it isn't that the Syrian government will automatically accept your payment even if you try to pay. You have to pay them to accept your payment. The bad economic situation for the majority of the situation will encourage migration to continue in tandem with the conflict.

Syria and the Shia Crescent

Sectarian and ethnic distribution in Syria



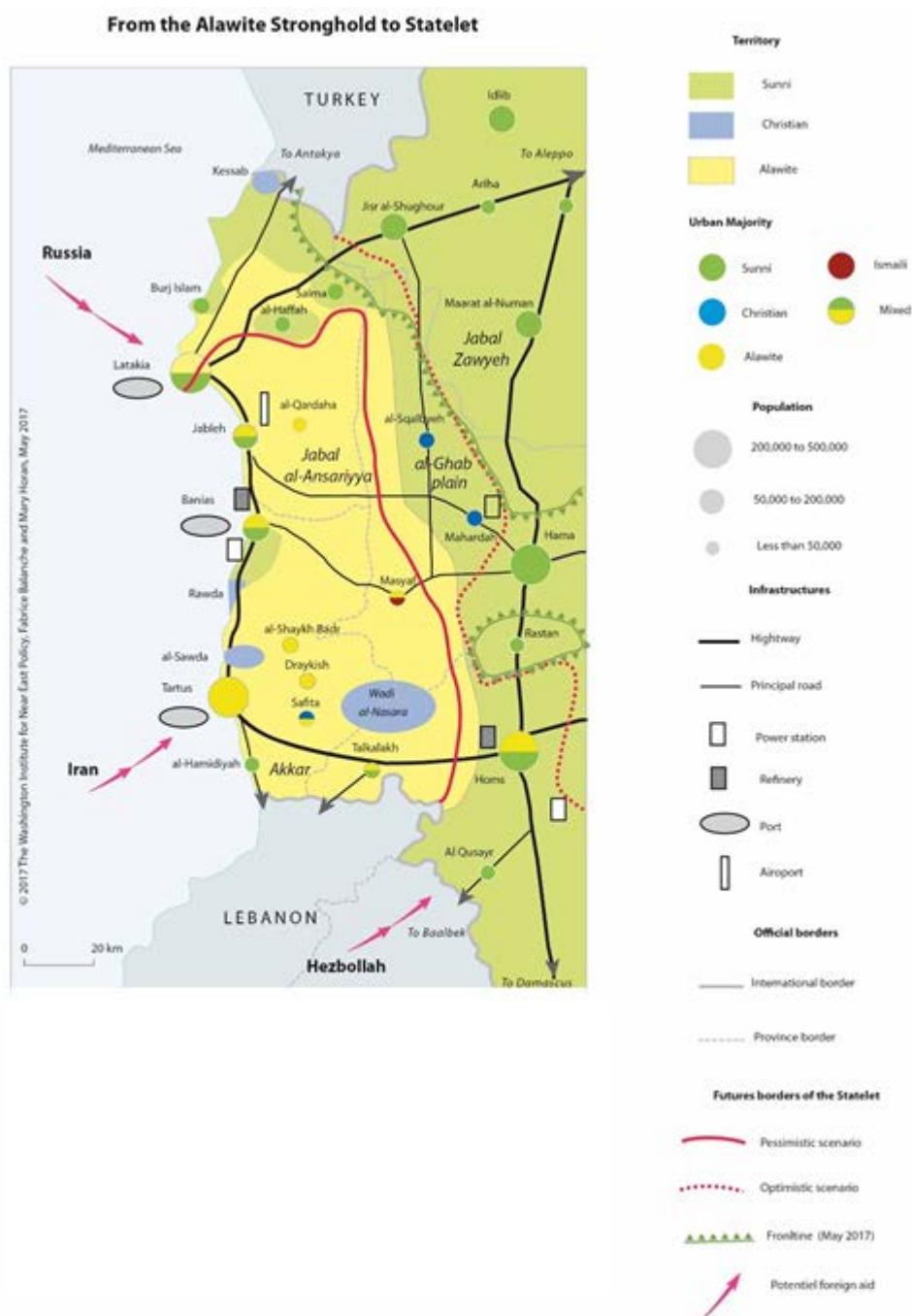
Sectarian Distribution in Levant



In 2004, the Twelver Shiites constitute 35% of the Lebanese population (1.4 million out of 4 million inhabitants), 1% of the Syrian population (180,000 out of 18 million), but 55% of Iraqis (15.4 million out of 28 million). The Arab Sunni are 28% of the Lebanese population (1.1 million), 65% of the Syrian population (11.7 millions) and 25% of the Iraqi population (7.8 millions). The total population of the area was 50 million; the Arab Sunni were 41% (20.6 million) and the Shia Twelver 34% (17 million). 8 million of Kurds live in the area, mostly Sunni (2.5 million in Syrian and 5.5 million in Iraq) who represent 16% of the population. The remaining 10% are Christian (1.5 million in Lebanon, 1.2 million in Syria and 1.5 million in Iraq), Druze, Alawite and other very minority denominations. The proportions have not changed much since 2004, except for the Christians who left Syria and Iraq in droves. If the departure of the Syrian refugees is final (5 million Sunni Arabs out of 6 million) this will reduce the Arab Sunni relative weight too.

If the King of Jordan included the Druze, Alawite, Ismaili and Yazidis minorities in his approach to the Shia crescent, this increases their proportion in Lebanon and especially in Syria with the Alawites. However, in Lebanon, the Druze led by Walid Jumblatt were rather in the pro-Saudi camp, in addition they have little in common with the Twelver Shiites on the religious point of view. The Alawites officially belong to the great Shia family, but theological differences are enormous between these two branches of Shi'ism. The Alawite proximity to Iran comes more from the geopolitical alliance saddled between Hafez el Assad and the Islamic Republic in 1981. The Kurds in Syria and Iraq are almost all Sunnis, with the exception of those of Sinjar who belong to Yazidism and some communities in eastern Iraq that are Shiite Twelver. However, the 8 million Sunni Kurds living in Syria and Iraq dissociate themselves from Sunni Arabs and form separate communities. Therefore, neither Arab Twelver Shiites nor Arab Sunni have the majority in Levant.

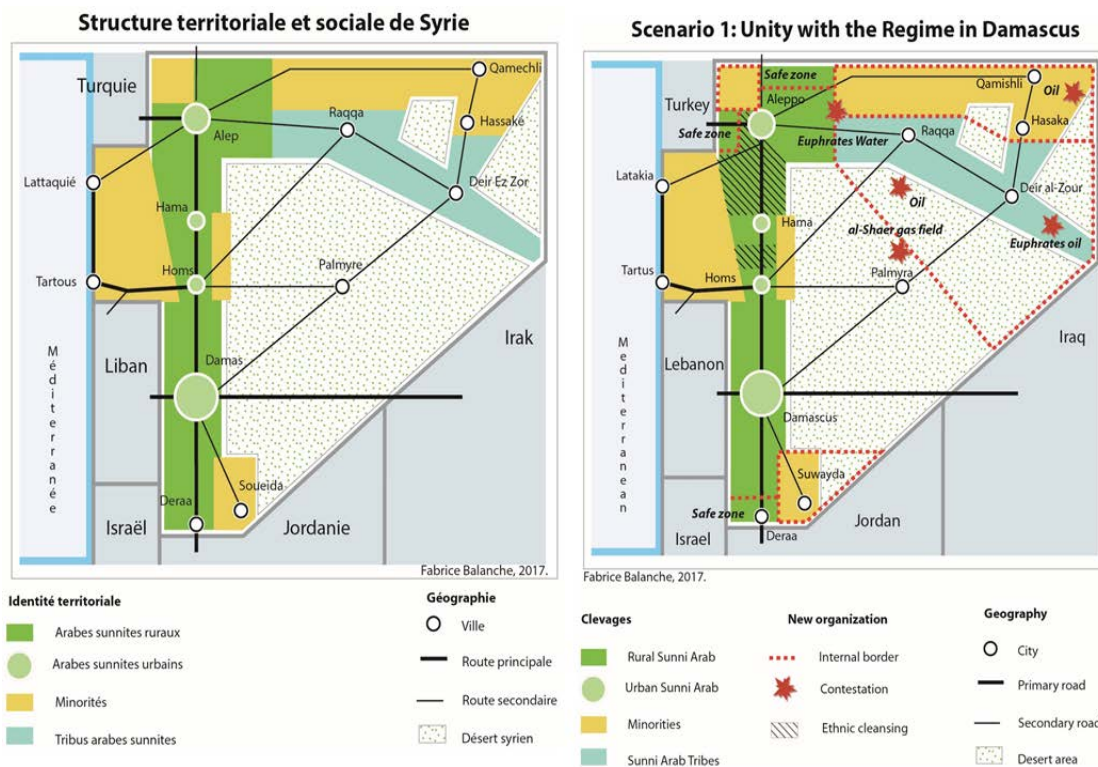
The civil war in Syria was quickly interpreted as a threat against all Shiites in Middle East. The rapid rise of Sunni jihadists, attacks on Shia minorities, and threats against the Sit Zainab Mausoleum were elements of mobilization in the Shia world. As early as winter 2012, attacks on Shiite villages on the outskirts of Homs forced Hezbollah to intervene, otherwise the Shiite clans of the Beqaa would have come to Syria themselves in the name of tribal solidarity. Damascus and Homs are close to the Lebanese border, so it could make sense as part of Cedar's defense for Hezbollah to send fighters to secure the border against jihadist incursions. On the other hand, it was harder to justify sending Hezbollah fighters to Aleppo. However, the defense of the Shiite villages of Nubol-Zahra and Foua-Kefraya is using as a mobilizing element. The Shiite history of medieval Aleppo has been abundantly recalled as well as the Foua origin of many Lebanese families. In Iraq, the destruction of the Samara Mosque in 2006 has been remembered to justify the presence of Shia militias to Damascus and Sit Zainab.



Question and Answer

Syria is one of the most corrupt countries – and reconstruction would probably cement the corruption rather than solve it – that isn't a very peaceful way to build a stronger state – which way do you think it will go? Can it survive being as corrupt as it is now?

It will not tolerate any opposition – he will allow the corruption to develop – it isn't a problem for Assad. You can arrest anyone under the context of corruption to eliminate your enemy. The regime will be under the protection of Iran. To understand Syria we have four different components of Syrian society – minorities, rural Arab Sunnis, urban Arab Sunnis, Arab tribes – the regime will let autonomy happen in the west of Syria (with Kurds) – they will leave them as long as they are recognising Assad's power in exchange for a portion of the oil; social peace in exchange for funds. The state doesn't intervene in local affairs and he is ruling indirectly in a way. In the western main cities you will have direct government from the regime, in the suburbs you will have indirect government – like Aleppo before the war – tribal mafias aligned with the state. Even the Druze will have more autonomy because they have been loyal. This will be the new governance of Syria – many political and legal insecurities (**Maps: Structure territoriale et sociale de Syrie**).



I want to ask about the role of President Assad in this regional power game and how long do you think he will be in office?

A very long time – Assad is the keystone of the system. Why the Iranians and Russians don't want to remove him? Syria is a 'godfather state' – they have spent 30 years to build this system and to catch the loyalty of the different warlords etc. The father gave this legitimacy to his son. I met Assad two years ago – nobody took him seriously before the war – his name was a 'giraffe' – no one calls him that anymore. He has proved his legitimacy as a 'strong' man who has ruled by ferocity and threat. So he will be the key man in the war, and plays between Russia and Iran. But if he has to be careful. He knows where he is going – I interviewed him

for two hours a couple of years ago – on the domestic level it was less clear, but on the geopolitical point of view, he understands very well the situation.

A question on southern Damascus – in Eastern Ghouta, in your opinion, why is Assad leaving groups like Daesh and Jaysh al Islam – why is he leaving them there like that?

It is difficult to retake this area Yarmouk, Ghouta – today, in 2012, the rebels – these small points (Alawite/Christian/Ismaili) and central Damascus were loyal to the regime because they were minority populations there. So since the 1970s Hafez al Assad settled minorities in the key points around Damascus to break the ‘Sunni belt’ around Damascus. Whoever controls Damascus controls Syria. All the urban planning of Damascus is done in this way – very large avenues / highways useless for transportation but - used to break the territory – very useful for fighting an insurgency. But they left the smaller roads in the Sunni Arab belt where it is hard to enter with tanks – it is very narrow – hard to penetrate inside of some of those area – otherwise, you have to destroy the whole area. The problem is that the regime let the Sunni Arab belt areas develop into informal settlements. This the core area of the rebellion where you have the strongest rebels. This is the urban difficulty of penetrating inside so they can’t get deep into Ghouta. You can’t just retake the area, you have to be able to deal with and control the area through a land war.

Annex: Reading suggestions from speakers

Pro-Regime Forces (C. Kozak)

- [Iran's Assad Regime](#), ISW, March 2017
- [The Decay of the Syrian Regime is Much Worse Than You Think](#), War on the Rocks, August 2016
- [Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience](#), Carnegie, March 2016
- [The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency To Civil War](#), ISW, March 2013

Opposition-Held Syria and 'De-Escalation Zones' (C. Kozak)

- [Southern Syria Deal Fails to Constrain Iran and al-Qaeda](#), ISW, November 2017
- [Jihad Wins in Idlib](#), Foreign Affairs, August 2017
- [Into the Tunnels](#), Century Foundation, December 2016
- [Keeping the Lights On in Rebel Idlib](#), Century Foundation, November 2016
- [Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers](#), ISW, March 2016

Family Law (E. Van Eijk)

- Van Eijk, Esther. *Family Law in Syria: Patriarchy, Pluralism and Personal Status Laws* (2016), London: I.B. Tauris.
- 'Pluralistic Family Law in Syria: Bane or Blessing?' (2014) in: *Electronic Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law* Vol. 2, 73-82
- 'Unity in Multiplicity: Shared Cultural Understandings on Marital Life in a Damascus Catholic and Muslim Court' (2013) in: *Erasmus Law Review* 3/4 (December 2013), special issue on Legal Pluralism, 204-213.

Rojava region/Kurdish issues and Socio-economics / development in Syria (F. Balanche)

Articles by Fabrice Balanche:

- Not Money Alone: The Challenges of Syrian Reconstruction: [url](#)
- A Half-Million Syrian Returnees? A Look Behind the Numbers: [url](#)
- Syria-Iraq: Limiting Iranian Influence Implies Returning To Realpolitik: [url](#)
- The Kurdish Path to Socialism in Syria: [url](#)
- From Qamishli to Qamishlo: A Trip to Rojava's New Capital: [url](#)
- Assad Needs 'Useless Syria' Too: [url](#)
- Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War (February 2018): [url](#)



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