

Syrian Forces Preparing for Big Move against Al Qaeda and ISIS. US Forces to the Rescue of the Terrorists?

By [Moon of Alabama](#)

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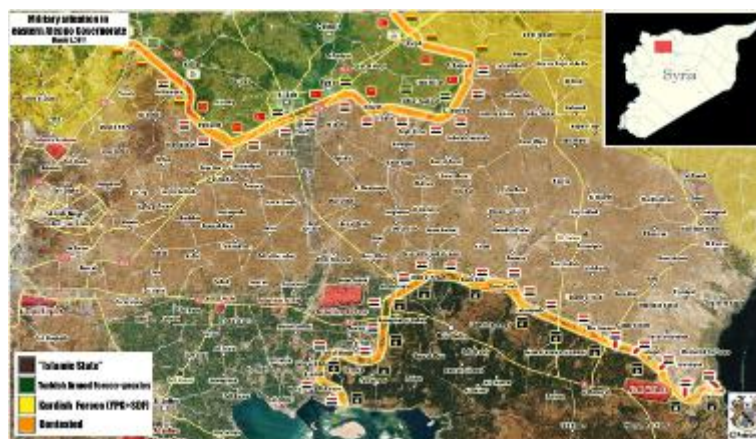
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During the last week significant moves in Syria have taken place east of Aleppo. But the situation there will likely soon calm down. The next intense phase of the war may well be a Syrian army attack on al-Qaeda's position in Idlib governate in the north-west of the country.

One objective of the Syrian Arab Army move east of Aleppo city was to **block the invading Turkish forces** from reaching further south. This had been achieved [as of last week](#). The main objective though was to reach the pumping stations at the Euphrates which supply Aleppo city with drinking water. This aim was achieved yesterday. **The SAA managed to evict the Islamic State** from the shut-down station before it could blow it up. The generators and pumps were booby trapped but seem otherwise operational. After 40 days of strictly rationed water Aleppo city and its nearly 2 million people will soon be back on a normal water supply.

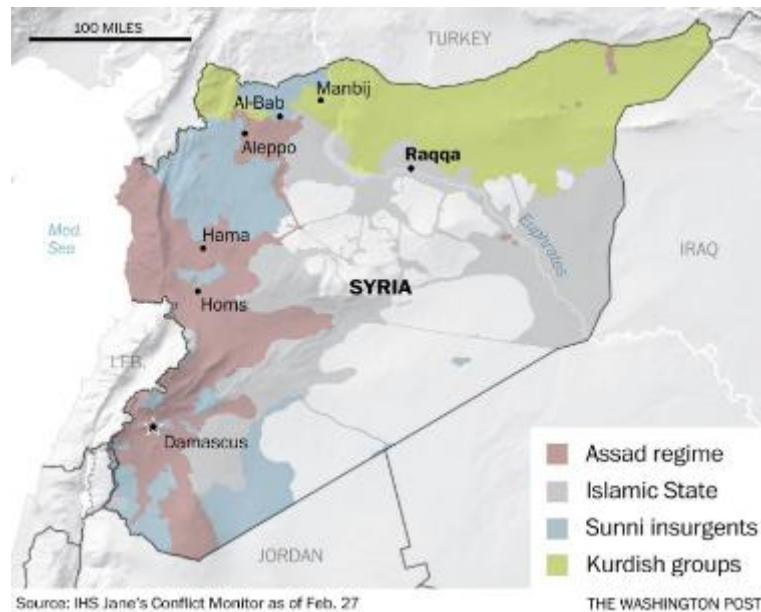


map by [Peto Lucem bigger](#)

I expect that the SAA contingent in east-Aleppo will now move further south and **then east along the Euphrates towards Raqqa**. This move though will no longer have a high priority. There is no longer an urgent need to continue in the area. Should the Islamic State stop its retreat in the area and show significant resistance the SAA is likely to stop and only hold its line.

The Turkish government still insists on taking Manbij currently held by the Kurdish YPK (under the label "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF)) which is now a U.S. proxy force under U.S. military command. Russia moved to insert Syrian army forces between the

Turkish forces west of Manbij and the city. Thereby a buffer has been created between the Turkish (proxy) forces of “moderate rebels” and U.S. proxy forces of the Kurdish SDF. A few Russian special forces entered the area. As no SAA soldiers were readily available some local Arabs and Kurds were asked to put up a Syrian flag and to call themselves “Syrian border guard”. They happily agreed to do so.



map via [WaPo bigger](#)

Parallel to the Russian move a U.S. sub-unit of the 75th Ranger Regiment made a show of force by driving five 8-wheeler Stryker vehicles with U.S. flags through some towns around Manbij. The signal to Turkey is clear. There are Russian and U.S. forces here. Do not dare to proceed into the area and to attack their Kurdish friends. **A meeting was held in Ankara between the Turkish military command and the U.S. and Russian chiefs of staff. It is not yet known what the outcome was.**

Despite the clear signals some proxy units under Turkish command opened fire on the “Syrian border guard” in the area. The Syrian government says that [a few of them were killed](#) and it again [raised the issue](#) of the Turkish invasion with the United Nations. I expect the situation around Manbij to calm down. It would be very dangerous for Turkey to continue attacking in the area against the clear position of Russia and the U.S. military.

Further to the east the SDF continued to move towards Raqqa which is last bigger city in Syria held by the Islamic State. It is likely that ISIS will defend the city when it gets attacked. Turkey would like to take part in the attack on the city but the U.S. military has blocked that idea. It prefers to continue with its Kurdish partners. As these do not have heavy weapons the U.S. is introducing new forces into the area.

Already some 500 U.S. special forces (Green Berets) are training and leading the 10,000+ strong SDF proxy force. A small army unit is with them and provides artillery support with two long range MLRS missile systems. Added to these were the Ranger elements seen around Manbij. 400 U.S. Marines (11th MEU) were announced to soon enter the area. They will mostly provide 155mm artillery support and will take care of resupplies. 2,500 soldiers of the 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne are currently [staging in Kuwait](#). It is not yet known what their task might be. The U.S. now has four military air fields in the Syrian Kurdish area north-east of the Euphrates. Two are for helicopters and two will soon be able to also service

larger fixed-wing transport planes.

All this build up is taking place without a definite decision by the White House on how to proceed in Syria. The Wall Street Journal [reports](#) of discussions about a model where the U.S. and its proxies take Raqqa from the Islamic State and then concede it to the Syrian government. This would make a lot of sense but will surely be opposed by the Israeli/Saudi lobby in Washington as well as by some U.S. military. No final decision is expected before mid April when Turkey will hold a referendum about a presidential constitution. Other reports cite the U.S. commander in the area [talking](#) about a bigger “U.S. stabilization force” that will take over the area when the Islamic State is defeated.

Such a force would clearly be consider a U.S. occupation hostile to the Syrian government. It would be met with intense guerilla operations aimed at evicting the occupiers.

East of Homs the Syrian army has retaken Palmyra and the surrounding mountain and oil-field areas. Russian special forces were involved in this operation. I do not expect further large moves from there for the time being.

In the Damascus area the Syrian army continues to squeeze a few “rebel” held enclaves. These are binding many Syrian soldiers. When they are eliminated a sizable reserve will be available to be used in further battles.

There have recently been no significant movements in the southern areas around Daraa and near the Jordanian border. Jordan is involved in talks with Russia. Other talks have been held in Moscow between Putin and Netanyahu. Some plans are obviously made to evict the Islamic State and al-Qaeda from the Jordan-Israel-Lebanon borderline but especially the Israeli position is difficult to manage. It prefers to keep al-Qaeda in the area as a pressure group against the Syrian state. No results from the recent talks have been announced.

West of Aleppo city around Idlib city al-Qaeda has continued fighting with other Islamist groups like Ahrar al Sham. The al-Qaeda led “rebel” alliance in Idlib is some 10,000 strong and the biggest force in the area. It will be difficult to defeat or evict. Retaking Idlib governate and city requires a large operation by the Syrian army. But currently al-Qaeda is losing support with the population and is involved in infighting. Its support from the outside has diminished. But outside support for al-Qaeda, by Turkey, the U.S., Saudi Arabia or Qatar, could come back when the Syrian army attacks the area.

Main operations by the Syrian army in east-Aleppo and east-Homs have achieved their immediate aims. The units involved in these could now be moved to other areas. When the “rebel” pockets around Damascus are eliminated, hopefully soon, more forces become available. The large force and reserve the Syrian army needs to attack Idlib will soon be available.

Curiously the NY Times just [published](#) a somewhat sympathetic portrait of a U.S. born [al-Qaeda propagandist](#) who operates as al-Qaeda’s English language media channel in the area. Are we back to the “cuddly, moderate al-Qaeda” caricature that was earlier used to justify U.S. support for Takfiri terrorists?

Will the U.S. again support al-Qaeda should the Syrian army finally move to retake Idlib?

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