

Video: The War on Syria and the Next Loop of the Great Game

By [South Front](#)

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After the defeat of ISIS, the war in Syria entered a low intensity phase. However, the conflict is in no way near its end and the country remains one of the main points of instability around the world.

In August 2018, SouthFront released an extensive of military and diplomatic developments in the Syrian conflict in the period from the start of the Russian operation in September 2015 to August 2018. By that moment, Damascus forces backed up by Russia and Iran had liberated from terrorists large parts of central, eastern, southern and northern Syria, including Aleppo city, Palmyra and the countryside of Damascus. The US-led coalition and the Kurdish-dominated group branded as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) did have control of the cities of Manbij and Raqqah, and large parts of northwestern Syria. Additionally, the US military had a military garrison on the Damascus-Baghdad highway, in the Syrian border area of al-Tanf. The Turkish Armed Forces and Turkish-backed armed formations were in control of the Afrin region and the al-Bab-Azaz-Jarabulus triangle. The situation in the militant-held parts of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Lattakia provinces were partially frozen through the Astana talks format, which involves Turkey, Iran, Russia, Syria and representatives of the so-called moderate opposition.

Over the past 12 months, from August 2018 to July 2019 the desert areas of southeastern Syria, the eastern bank of the Euphrates, and the contact line between the Syrian Army and militants in southern Idlib and northern Hama became the main hot points of the conflict.

On September 10, the SDF assisted by US-led coalition special forces, artillery and aircraft started an advance on the ISIS-held pocket in eastern Deir Ezzor. The pocket included the towns of Baghuz, Hajin, al-Kashmah and multiple small settlements. The operation involved around 17,000 SDF fighters and included an intense air and artillery bombing campaign. The estimated number of ISIS members hiding in the pocket was 2,000-4,000. The offensive lasted until middle December when the last ISIS-held town, Hajin, fell into the hands of the SDF. Around 1,000 ISIS members and 500 SDF fighters were killed during the operation. Thousands of civilians, mainly members of ISIS fighters' families, left the pocket and were moved to SDF-held filtration camps. The most widely known of them is the al-Hawl camp in the province of al-Hasakah.

Security operations on the eastern bank of the Euphrates are still ongoing. The goal is to track and hunt down remaining ISIS cells. ISIS units continue to carry out attacks on SDF positions and check points.

In the period from August to November of 2018, units of the Syrian Army conducted an extensive security operation against ISIS cells in the province of al-Suwayda after ISIS terrorists had carried out a series of bombings and gun attacks on civilian targets in the countryside of the provincial capital.

The ISIS manpower in the al-Safa plateau was around 1,000. At least 400 of them were eliminated, according to pro-government sources. The rest of the terrorists hid in the desert on the edge of the US-held area of al-Tanf. The US tactic of striking any pro-government unit entering this area allowed ISIS cells to avoid total defeat. Over 100 army troops were reportedly killed during the operation.

The November 19 announcement of the ISIS defeat in al-Safa did not put an end to ISIS attacks across the Homs-Deir Ezzor desert, but did allow the terrorist threat in the al-Suwayda countryside to be reduced. The ISIS threat is unlikely to be removed from the desert areas anytime soon. Pro-government forces don't have enough free resources to conduct operations on the scale needed to clear the entire desert.

The main reason is that large forces and means are busy with blocking and controlling the bounds of the so-called Idlib de-escalation zone. The de-escalation agreement of 2017 excluded groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. As a result of this the agreement did not achieve its key goal: to separate radicals from the so-called moderate opposition. For instance, even the Turkish-backed militant alliance, the National Front for Liberation, created in May 2018 fell under the influence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham after it had faced the option to obey or be eliminated.

In September 2018, Turkey, Iran and Russia made an effort to rescue the ceasefire regime by agreeing to establish a demilitarized zone around the Idlib zone. The sides agreed to establish a 15-25km demilitarized zone on the contact line. Heavy weapons and members of radical groups had to withdraw from the demilitarized zone. After this, Russian and Turkish troops were expected to launch joint patrols. Additionally, the deal said that the M4 and M5 highways, which go through the militant-held areas, had to be re-opened by the end of 2018. This never happened.

The Turkistan Islamic Party, Tanẓīm Ḥurras ad-Din, Ansar al-Tawhid, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Ansar al-Islam rejected the deal. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which then was passing through complicated times because of recent defeats by the army, released an ambiguous statement, but also de-facto rejected the initiative.

It appeared that Turkey was not willing or capable of fulfilling key points of the de-escalation deal:

- To divide the so-called 'moderate rebels', at least the Turkish-formed National Front for Liberation, from the terrorists;
- To force armed groups operating in the Idlib zone to withdraw heavy weapons and radical fighters from the demilitarized zone.

The situation continued deteriorating in the following months, with the most intense shelling and constant civilian casualties occurring in northern Hama, western Aleppo and northern Lattakia. Militants carried out multiple attacks on Russia's Hmeimim airbase in the province of Lattakia with armed unmanned aerial vehicles. These attacks were successfully repelled by Russian air defense forces.

At the same time, Turkey acted to prevent any possible military operation by the Syrian Army in the Idlib zone by various means. These included providing its proxies in the area with a new batch of weapons, including anti-tank guided missiles, and equipment, thus, allowing them to regain at least part of the power lost after the defeats of the previous years.

By April 2019, the situation had deteriorated to the extent that the Syrian Army and its allies were forced to launch a limited peace-enforcing operation in northwestern Hama. It started on April 30. Multiple pro-government outlets speculated that it was a long-awaited large-scale offensive on Idlib, but the real goal of the effort was to destroy the militants' re-created military infrastructure at the contact line and to limit the shelling on civilian areas carried out by the moderates.

The operation involved units from the Syrian Army, the Tiger Forces, the 4th Armoured Division, the 5th Assault Corps and the National Defense Forces. They liberated the town of Kafr Nabudah and surrounding villages, but after a Turkish diplomatic intervention, they agreed on a series of ceasefires and their progress stalled.

A separate effort to capture the militants' strong point of Kbanah in northern Lattakia resulted in no real progress.

On July 28 evening, the Syrian Army renewed their push on militant positions in northern Hama. The configuration of frontlines sets an apparent pretext for further limited operations that should push militants back and create a buffer zone to limit shelling on civilian targets in this particular area. But no large-scale military operations are expected in the region in the near future.

The last but not least security issue in modern Syria is the situation in the northwestern part of the country. Under Turkish control, the area of Afrin and the northern countryside of Aleppo turned into a hub of organized crime. This as well as the radical ideology of most of the Turkish-backed 'moderate groups' are among the main destabilizing factors there.

The inability of Ankara to establish proper discipline among its proxies allows Kurdish rebels affiliated with the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers Party to carry out successful attacks in Afrin. Kurdish cells had carried out dozens of attacks resulting in multiple casualties among the Turkish Army and pro-Turkish armed groups since September 2018.

The Assad government is still viewed as illegitimate by Ankara, although its rhetoric has softened due to the growth of Russian influence on the theater of operations and the military defeat suffered by several groups backed by Turkey. Other factors were the political and economic pressure exerted by Moscow after the Su-24 shootdown and the subsequent rapprochement that led to the implementation of the TurkStream project, the S-400 deal and other developments in the sphere of economic and military cooperation. These projects affect the Turkish foreign policy agenda.

Turkey is not demonstrating plans to annex the Syrian territory that it controls in the north in order to avoid a negative reaction from Russia and Iran. It plans to use these areas as bargaining chips in order to gain preferential treatment for work in post-war Syria or, if no comprehensive diplomatic deal on the conflict is reached, to create a pro-Turkish quasi-

state.

Simultaneously, Turkey seeks to neutralize and limit the influence of US-backed Kurdish armed groups, which it sees as a threat to its national security. This task is closely entwined with the current agenda of US-Turkish relations. These relations were strongly revised after the 2016 failed military coup in Turkey. Ankara accused the CIA of playing a role in it. Relations deteriorated and Erdogan placed value on the restoration of relations with Russia and Iran. In particular, this led to reaching and implementing the S-400 deal. In its turn, the US punished Turkey by officially excluding it from the F-35 programme, threatening Ankara with sanctions and other aggressive actions in the media sphere and unfriendly rhetoric on the international scene.

This behavior of the Trump administration is surprising because it contributes to a further separation of Turkey from its NATO partners. It is highly likely, that this is among the reasons behind the recent escalation of the situation around the Cyprus question.

In the event of a further deterioration of relations, Washington may opt to motivate Kurdish groups to increase their insurgency activities against Turkish targets in northern Syria and in the southeastern part of Turkey itself.

Through its influence on the Kurdish elites, the US has successfully fueled Kurdish separatism even further and put an end to any kind of constructive negotiations between Damascus and the SDF. The SDF and its leaders put their shirts on the US military presence in the country and are not likely to take any steps towards any real normalization of relations with the Assad government without a direct order from Washington for as long as US troops are deployed in Syria.

Israel is another actor that pursues an active policy in the region and seeks to influence processes that could affect the interests of the state, as its leadership sees them. Israel justifies aggressive actions in Syria by claiming that it is surrounded by irreconcilable enemies, first of all Iran and Hezbollah, who try to destroy Israel or at least diminish its security. Tel Aviv makes all efforts to ensure that in the immediate vicinity of its borders there would be no force, non-state actors or states whose international and informational activities or military actions might damage Israeli interests. This, according to the Israeli vision, should ensure physical security of the entire territory currently under the control of Israel and its population.

The start of the Syrian war became a gift for Israel. It was strong enough to repel direct military aggression by any terrorist organization, but got a chance to use the chaos to propel its own interests. Nonetheless, the rigid stance of the Israeli leadership that became used to employing chaos and civil conflicts in the surrounding countries as the most effective strategy for ensuring the interests of the state, was delivered a blow. Israel missed the moment when it had a chance to intervene in the conflict as a kind of peacemaker, at least on the level of formal rhetoric, and, with US help, settle the conflict to protect its own interest. Instead, leaders of Israel and the Obama administration sabotaged all Russian peace efforts in the first years of the Russian military operation and by 2019, Tel Aviv had found itself excluded from the list of power brokers in the Syrian settlement. Hezbollah and Iran, on the other hand, strengthened their position in the country after they, in alliance with Damascus and Russia, won the war on the major part of Syrian territory, and Iran through the Astana format forged a tactical alliance with Turkey.

The aggressive Israeli actions, including the September 2018 strikes that led to Russia's IL-20 shutdown, even further undermined its interests after Russia employed a long-delayed decision to supply Syria with the S-300. While this system has not been used by the Syrian military against Israeli aircraft yet, the threat itself of the use of the S-300 is the factor damaging Israeli interests.

Iran and Hezbollah exploited the preliminary outcome of the conflict in Syria, and the war on ISIS in general, to defend their own security and to expand their influence across the region. The so-called Shia crescent turned from being a myth exploited by Western diplomats and mainstream media into reality. Iran and Hezbollah appeared to be reliable partners for their regional allies even in the most complicated situations.

Russia's strategic goal is the prevention of radical islamists from coming to power. Russia showed itself ready to enter dialogue with the moderate part of the Syrian opposition. Its leadership even demonstrated that it is ready to accept the interests of other actors, the US, Israel, Kurdish groups, Turkey, Iran, Hezbollah, if this would help in reaching a final deal to settle the conflict.

Summing up the developments of this 12-month period, we may expect that the current low-intensity state of the Syrian conflict will continue for years. However, several factors and developments may instigate the renewal of fully-fledged hostilities:

- The death of Bashar al-Assad would create a situation of uncertainty within the patriotic part of the Syrian leadership;
- Changes within the Russian political system or issues inside Russia that could lead to full or partial withdrawal of support to the Syrian government and the withdrawal of the forces;
- A major war in the Middle East that would turn the entire region into a battlefield. In the current situation, this war could only start between Iran and the US-Israeli-led bloc.

The round of the geopolitical standoff that started in 2011 has finished. The Greater Middle East is now in a twilight zone that lies before a new loop of the neverending Great Game. The next round of the geopolitical standoff will likely take place in a larger region including the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Consistently, the stakes will grow involving more resources of states and nations in geopolitical roulette.

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