

Security Scenarios for Syria in 2021-2022

(An executive summary of a longer report)

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Introduction

Syria is a geographic entity divided into three main zones of control, each ruled by local actors with the strong and seemingly indefinite support of powerful foreign actors. These three zones are one zone in western, central, and eastern Syria controlled by the Syrian government, a second zone in northwest and northern Syria along the Syrian-Turkish border controlled by the Syrian opposition and supported by Turkey and a third zone in northeast Syria controlled by the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) and its military the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) - which is supported by the United States and several of its allies that are part of the global coalition to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The common perception by observers of the Syrian conflict is that it is frozen; that Syria will be indefinitely divided into these different territorial zones of control.

This assumption obscures the fact though that a significant amount of fluidity on the ground within Syria's three main zones of control is possible. Each of these zones has its own unique characteristics and local customs that must be understood to draw broader assessments on how the wider Syrian conflict might be resolved one day.

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), convened a select group of Syria experts - Serhat Erkmen from Turkey, Nicholas A. Heras from the United States, and Kirill Semenov from Russia - to analyze the security dynamics in each of the zones and to assess the future scenarios over the next year that could develop in those zones and in the interactions between them.

Players, Context, and Factors

1. Northwest Syria

Serhat Erkmen assesses that the Idlib zone in northwest Syria is unlikely to have significant shifts in the local security dynamics over the next six months. Keeping the status quo in Idlib will be contingent upon the maintenance of a good working relationship on Syria issues between Russia and Turkey through the Astana process. While the Syrian government will continue to challenge the armed opposition groups in Idlib, the most important factor in northwest Syria is the Russian-Turkish relationship, he argues. Turkey has a significant military deployment in Idlib that should be sufficiently powerful enough to dissuade the Syrian government from launching a renewed campaign there, which would prevent a further destabilization of the zone in northwest Syria and preclude a catastrophic humanitarian situation in Idlib itself that would likely lead to millions of Syrians trying to enter Turkey. The Turkish position in Idlib is to maintain the status quo for as long as possible, both through diplomacy with Russia via the Astana process and through Turkish military deployment; Ankara also aims to prevent strategic surprises in Idlib and in Syria that would disrupt Russian-Turkish engagement on other regions of importance, such as the Northern Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

A further dynamic to watch closely in the Idlib zone is the continued consolidation of power by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This extremist jihad coalition has survived the Russian and Syrian campaigns against Idlib and it has thus far aggressively defeated or co-opted all its Syrian armed opposition rivals in the zone, including those from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and al-Qaeda linked fighters such as Hurras al-Din (HAD). HTS's willingness to confront HAD and al-Qaeda-linked groups, its victories against the SNA and its strong influence over dynamics on the ground in the Idlib zone, could lead the West to work with HTS in a process similar to how it engaged with the Taliban. HTS has also turned into a quiet partner with the West against al-Qaeda, providing actionable intelligence on important trans-national Salafi-Jihadi operatives in Idlib that has led to likely U.S. drone strikes against these operatives. Turkey would not stand in the way of the modernization and integration of HTS into the SNA that may lead to the recognition of HTS by the international community. However, there is risk in normalizing HTS in the West as this would be a red line to Russia which considers the group to be a terrorist organisation that also blocks the Syrian government from taking control over Idlib.

While the status quo in the Idlib zone is the most likely scenario in the next six months, which benefits Turkey, there continue to be risks in northwest Syria which Turkey must face. For example, Turkish soldiers deployed to the Idlib zone are consistently threatened by attacks from al-Qaeda linked groups and Syrian government forces, despite the capable conventional forces that Turkey brought into northwest Syria. Moreover, Turkish military responses to attacks from Syrian government forces carry the further risk of escalation with Damascus that could lead to a breakdown in the Russian-Turkish understanding on the Idlib zone, with potential consequences on the dynamics in other parts of Syria especially in northeast Syria. The Idlib zone will continue to be a challenge to Turkey's Syria and regional strategy, and the Turkish goal to maintain good working relations with Russia.

2. Northeast Syria

Nicholas A. Heras assesses that there are unlikely to be dramatic shifts in the security situation in the zone controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) over the next six months, so long as there remains a continuing U.S. military presence in the SDF zone. The likeliest place where security conditions could deteriorate to threaten the status quo in the zone, he believes, would be in Deir Azzour governorate. However, the scenario that represents the greatest risk to the SDF would be multiple, concurrent crisis throughout northeast Syria because the SDF is highly dependent on local conscripts who are unreliable in a crisis with local actors. It is important to "see the map" as the SDF does. The AANES is not a cohesive territory where the SDF has full control over the local population and where it enjoys a monopoly on violence. Several areas within the core territory of the AANES are under the direct control of its enemies such as the Turkish-backed Peace Spring Zone, under the control of the Syrian government and its allies such as in Qamishli and Hasakah cities or remain territorially

part of the AANES because of the presence of Russian forces that patrol and protect the AANES from a resumed Turkish military campaign.

The AANES also has several strategic vulnerabilities that remain a constant challenge, which are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitics and could impact the security and stability of northeast Syria over the course of the next year. These strategic vulnerabilities are lack of access to water for an agriculturally dependent economy, providing potable water to three million residents of the zone, improving the flow of electricity to civilian areas, maintaining regular humanitarian assistance access from foreign sources and flow of trade into and out of the AANES. All these strategic vulnerabilities, when combined with the fragility of the local economy in northeast Syria, as a result of decades of neglect by the Syrian government prior to the 2011 uprising in the country, wartime neglect and destruction including from major combat operations against ISIS, and disruptions caused by COVID-19 lockdowns – not to mention unreliable electricity and water access - are exacerbating factors that drive local dissatisfaction with the SDF in several areas within the AANES.

The SDF is a complicated security organization that continues to exhibit features that demonstrate its origin as a coalition of disparate militias assembled by the Coalition to combat ISIS. Currently, the SDF's High Command continues to draw from, and be associated with, the Kurdish-majority Peoples' Protection Units (YPG). The dynamic between the Syrian Kurdish-majority SDF high command, the YPG, and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) operatives that are based in northeast Syria will also have notable consequences on the stability of the zone. SDF leaders with a close relationship with the U.S. want to focus on building the AANES in Syria, with the support of the United States, especially the SDF commander General Mazloum Abdi. However, PKK leaders based in Qandil in northern Iraq, reportedly with the support of some figures within the YPG, want to use Syria as strategic depth for operations against Turkey inside Turkish territory and in Iraq; a strategy that the U.S. would never support, and which would probably risk the U.S.-SDF relationship. Moreover, the debate between the SDF high command and the PKK, which apparently includes fears of potential future assassination attempts on Mazloum, is one of the keys dynamics that could dramatically change the security conditions and the geopolitical considerations in northeast Syria.

Regional politics is also a factor which complicates matters considerably. A key dynamic in northeast Syria will be the continuing evolution of relations between the SDF and Russia. SDF leaders distrust Russia because the YPG core within the SDF high command believes that Russia allowed Turkey to invade Kurdish-majority region of Afrin in northwest Syria in March 2018 and also believes that Russia is behind influence operations to undermine the security of the AANES in Raqqqa governorate and Deir Azzour governorate. While the SDF views Russia as a less than ideal partner, its leadership however recognizes that it needs Russian support to mitigate the risk from further Turkish military operations into the AANES zone. Although the SDF is dependent on U.S. military airpower to generally protect it, its leadership also needs to maintain a working relationship with Russia to defend against potential future Turkish military campaign into the AANES zone, in the event of a U.S. military withdrawal from northeast Syria.

3. Syrian Government Areas

Kirill Semenov assesses that there are unlikely to be dramatic shifts in security in the Syrian government-controlled areas. However, there will likely continue to be tension between Russia's operations in Deraa governorate and Quneitra governorate in southwest Syria and the activities of key Syrian government figures especially Maher al-Assad and his Fourth Division that are closely linked to Iran. While Russia and Iran are likely to maintain their effective division of labour in Syria, Moscow is concerned that Iran's activities in Syria that are directed toward Israel will be a destabilizing factor that will threaten to curtail Russia's objectives in Syria.

In northeast Syria, Russia will continue to seek out opportunities to influence events on the ground in the areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the U.S.-led Coalition, most notably through engagement with local Arab tribes. Yet Russia acknowledges that the continued U.S. military presence in northeast Syria in the SDF zone is a challenge to expanding its influence in support of the Syrian government there. Russia is also limited in its freedom to manoeuvre in northeast Syria because it does not control the airspace, even though Russian forces patrol parts of the Syrian-Turkish border with Turkish forces and there are significant Russian forward operating bases in Syrian government-controlled areas in the zone most notably in Qamishli. Deir Azzour governorate represents an opportunity for Russia to support the Syrian government to entrench its power in a strategic area, but also a challenge because Iran is actively building its own separate zone of influence in Deir Azzour, which complicates the stability of the situation there because the Iranian activities are drawing unwanted Israeli attention.

Russia's general approach for the next six months and perhaps longer is to continue to work toward consolidating the Syrian government's position and to try to maintain calm between Syria and its neighbours. Several Arab states, such as the UAE, are cautiously expanding engagement with Damascus, which Russia hopes to leverage, if possible, into a further renormalizing the Syrian government with the Arab World and potentially open channels of financial support for reconstruction in the areas that Damascus controls. Russia's engagement with Turkey on the Idlib zone is important and the status quo that Moscow negotiated with Ankara is generally furthering Russia's policy on Syria, even with HTS in control of the zone and the Syrian government periodically testing the status quo with attacks against Idlib. The Russian deal with Turkey typifies the approach to Syria that Moscow wants to follow, which is to minimize the disputes with Syria's neighbours to cut pragmatic deals that keep Bashar al-Assad in power, a strategy that the Syrian government still does not fully grasp. However, Russia is not wedded to keeping Bashar al-Assad in power and would be open to an alternate leader or governing regime, so long as the new leader and government honoured a commitment to Russia's indefinite military presence in Syria and it would be able to ensure other long-term Russian interests in Syria.

Likely Scenarios for the Next Year

The most likely scenario in northwest Syria maintains the status quo, with small changes. Since the dynamics affecting northwest Syria are mainly dependent on larger issues such as the regional balance of power, or key changes in countries' foreign policy preferences, triggering larger changes is less likely. Currently, making even a small change in northwest Syria becomes very costly due to Turkey's military presence. Therefore, in the short term, the most likely scenario is the first one, unless there would be a dramatic change either in Turkish-U.S. or Turkish-Russian relations in terms of northeast Syria or international problems. Idlib's internal dynamics have less impact for the future of the wider northwest Syria zone in the short term. However, in the long term, it may be more important.

The status quo between Turkish-backed forces and the SDF in the northern areas of the AANES on the Syrian-Turkish border is tense and features frequent violence between the two sides, but the presence of both the U.S. and Russia in that region also mitigates the potential for a resumption of widespread violence for the foreseeable future. It is widely believed that so long as the United States remains invested in northeast Syria, the external enemies of the SDF will be unlikely to compel it to surrender or to carry on with further military campaigns to seize territory from the AANES. Although the Biden administration has signalled that it will continue to maintain a military presence in Syria and to provide stabilization funding for post-ISIS areas, the SDF is at an inflection point because the economic and geopolitical challenges placed before the AANES are becoming too difficult to manage.

Iran and Russia still have common ground, with both countries ready to further support the regime and continue their work with Turkey as part of the Astana format. However, if the official rhetoric is put aside, Moscow–Tehran relations on the Syria track can be described as a division of spheres of influence and competences. There are disputed regions, such as Deraa governorate and Quneitra governorate in southwest Syria, where competition between Russia and Iran is ongoing. There, the Russian military is trying to prevent the excessive presence of pro-Iranian groups along the borders with Israel, preserving the forces of the so-called “reconciled opposition,” including those reconciled fighters acting under the flag of the pro-Russian Fifth Corps of the Syrian military.

Deraa and Quneitra will continue to see the actions of underground armed opposition cells, which attack both the Syrian government's security forces and former armed opposition members that “betrayed the revolution” and sided with Damascus or the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps. This situation also benefits Assad's security forces, which find it increasingly difficult to officially bring criminal charges against reconciled insurgents. They can now use their own resources, including the ones among former rebels who started serving in the Syrian intelligence services, to eradicate those armed opposition members that “got reconciled,” but are not convenient to the Syrian government - for instance, members of the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps. There is also a threat of provocation of the pro-Iranian forces deployed in the region against Israel and the countermoves of the Israel Defence Forces, although

escalation will unlikely extend beyond the scope of the actions that have already taken place before and will most likely come down to sporadic Israeli air and artillery strikes. Therefore, although tension in Deraa governorate and Quneitra governorate will still be evident, any radical or pivotal change over the next six months is unlikely.