

THE WAR REPORT 2018

THE SYRIAN ARMED CONFLICT: NEARING THE END ?



JANUARY 2019 | MARIJA SULCE

CONTEXT AND HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT¹

The Syrian armed conflict began in 2011 as a civil war, stemming from the Arab Spring protests. The Syrian people started protesting in March 2011 in Daraa against the corruption of President Bashar al-Assad's government, lack of political freedom and unemployment. The demonstrations took an ugly turn when the regime tried to crush the dissent by force.² After the forceful response to the demonstrations, protests against the regime erupted nationwide. The regime's opponents started taking up arms and the unrest began its descent into civil war in July 2011, when a group of defectors from the Syrian military began forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the aim of overthrowing President Assad's regime.³ During the almost eight years of ensuing civil war, many parties have joined the conflict, including many rebel groups as well as other states, highly complicating the war. The FSA with other opposition groups have controlled vast areas of Syrian territory, including the strategically important city of Aleppo, throughout most of the civil war. An important change came when Aleppo was retaken by the Government in 2016.⁴

The political unrest revealed the great religious divisions within Syrian communities, of which the largest are Sunni Muslims, representing around 74 percent of the population in 2011. Other Muslim religions, such as the Alawites, Ismailis and Shia, represented 13 percent, while Christians constituted 10 percent, and Druze 3 percent.⁵ Religious differences have fueled the conflict and have provided a platform for hardline groups, such as Islamic State (IS) to become key players. In 2013 and 2014, IS controlled more than 88,000 square kilometres across Iraq and Syria.⁶ Since then, its power has greatly declined and the group is now a shadow of its former self in Syria.

There has also been a lot of international involvement in the conflict, with many players pursuing their own goals

1 See for further information on the Syrian conflict, A. Bellal, 'Syria: Increasing Foreign Involvement in the Conflict', in *The War Report 2016*, Geneva Academy of IHL and Human Rights, 2017, <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlafiles/docman-files/The%20War%20Report%202016.pdf> (last accessed 15 December 2018).

2 'Why Is There a War in Syria', BBC News, 7 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

3 'Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning', Al Jazeera, 14 April 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

4 Ibid.

5 U.S. Department of State, Syria: July–December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, 13 September 2011, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168276.htm (last accessed 15 August 2018).

6 'ISIS Fast Facts', CNN International Edition, 3 September 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/index.html> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

and interests amid the unrest. The struggle for power in the region has drawn into the conflict countries such as the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel and many others. To a degree, the conflict has become more international in character, rather than remaining faithful to its non-international civil war roots. The conflict is no longer only about Syria's government and Assad's corruption; in recent years, it has become a pawn in the geopolitical struggles of the Middle East.⁷ Having said that, the international community has played an important role in trying to facilitate peace talks between the Assad regime and the opposition groups. One example is the Astana talks in 2017, which managed to set up de-escalation zones in Syria, sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran,⁸ as well as the demilitarized zone brokered by Turkey and Russia in the last remaining rebel stronghold in Idlib in September 2018.⁹

Approaching its eighth year, the Syrian war is one of the most devastating conflicts of the twenty-first century. So far, it has taken the lives of around half a million people, produced around 5.6 million refugees and displaced roughly 6.6 million people within Syrian territory.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as the year 2018 has unfolded, there has appeared to be a flicker of light, suggesting that the conflict might be entering its final stages.

PARTIES TO THE CONFLICTS

PARTIES TO THE INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS

US-Led Coalition

The US-led coalition of 77 states was formed in 2014 to combat IS in Iraq and Syria.¹¹ The most notable states in the coalition are: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and, of course, the US. Though the coalition's purpose is to fight

7 U. Friedman, 'Syria's War Has Never Been More International', 14 February 2018, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/syria-civil-war-next/553232/> (last accessed 7 October 2018).

8 'Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning'.

9 'Russia, Turkey Agree on Borders of Demilitarised Zone in Idlib', Al Jazeera, 22 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/russia-turkey-agree-borders-demilitarised-zone-idlib-180921142500450.html> (last accessed 7 October 2018).

10 A. Mohammed and P. Stewart, 'Exclusive: Despite Tensions, Russia Seeks U.S. Help to Rebuild Syria', Reuters, 3 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-syria-exclusive/exclusive-despite-tensions-russia-seeks-u-s-help-to-rebuild-syria-idUSKBN1KO2JP> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

11 Global Coalition, '79 Partners United in Defeating Daesh', <http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/> (last accessed 15 August 2018).



terrorism, since the Syrian Government has not consented to this foreign-troop presence, there is an international armed conflict between the US-led coalition and the Assad government, as established by The War Report 2016.¹² There are currently around 2,000 US troops on Syria's territory.¹³

Direct confrontation between Syria and the coalition took place for the first time in April 2017 when the US carried out a missile strike on a Syrian Government air base after the Government had used chemical weapons on its own population.¹⁴ Another direct confrontation took place almost exactly a year later in April 2018, when the US, Britain and France launched airstrikes against Syrian chemical weapon storage, military and research facilities after another suspected chemical attack by President Assad near Damascus.¹⁵

Though the US has been playing with the idea of withdrawing from Syria for a while, its most recent stance has shifted as the Trump administration has vowed to stay in Syria until the end of the war as a way to halt Iran's expansion across the Middle East.¹⁶

Turkey

Turkey is part of the US-led coalition, but it is also acting unilaterally against the Syrian Kurds, thus arguably meriting a separate mention for being in a non-international conflict

with Kurdish militant groups, and also in an international armed conflict with Syria as the Government has not accepted Turkish presence on its soil. Turkey has been present in the conflict since 2016 and President Erdoğan has recently said that Turkish troops will remain until a general election is held in Syria.¹⁷

Syrian Government

At the beginning of the war, the Syrian Army numbered between 250,000 and 300,000 troops; nevertheless, over the years of the conflict, due to casualties, defections and desertions, this number has greatly decreased.¹⁸ It is difficult to know the current number of the troops, but according to Global Firepower rankings, the number of active Syrian military personnel is currently around 154,000.¹⁹

Israel versus Iran on Syrian Territory

There is arguably an international armed conflict between Israel and Iran within Syrian territory, further complicating the situation. Iran is on Syrian territory to aid the Assad government's fight against rebel groups. In February 2018, an Iranian drone went into Israeli airspace from Syria and prompted a subsequent Israeli strike on the Iranian command centre, which had allegedly launched the drone. As this triggered Syrian anti-aircraft fire, Israel resorted to a broader wave of strikes on Syrian and Iranian targets.²⁰ There was another alleged Israeli airstrike on Syria's air base at the beginning of April that killed 7 Iranian military personnel, which Israel has not confirmed.²¹ At the end of April, there were more strikes targeting Syrian military positions in Hama and Aleppo, reportedly hitting two Iran-linked bases. It is not clear where the attack came from, but US officials have pointed the finger at Israel, warning that this is 'the latest sign that Israel and Iran are moving closer to open warfare'.²²

12 A. Bellal, *The War Report: Armed Conflicts in 2016*, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 2017, <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomla-tools-files/docman-files/The%20War%20Report%202016.pdf> (last accessed 26 November 2018).

13 M. Kranz, 'Trump Reportedly Wants to Get Out of Syria — Here's How Many Troops the US Has in the Country', *Business Insider*, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/troop-levels-in-syria-trump-2018-4> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

14 H. Cooper, M. R. Gordon, and M. D. Shear, 'Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria', *The New York Times*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

15 H. Cooper, T. Gibbons-Neff and B. Hubbard, 'U.S., Britain and France Strike Syria Over Suspected Chemical Weapons Attack', *The New York Times*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-strikes-syria-attack.html> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

16 M. Ryan, P. Sonne and J. Hudson, 'In Syria, Trump Administration Takes On New Goal: Iranian Retreat', *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-us-takes-on-new-goal-iranian-retreat/2018/09/30/625c182a-c27f-11e8-97a5-ab1e46bb3bc7_story.html?utm_term=.a6c0b089ff13 (last accessed 7 October 2018).

17 'Erdoğan: Turkey Will not Leave Syria Until an Election Is Held', *Al Jazeera*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/erdogan-turkey-leave-syria-election-held-181004174206836.html> (last accessed 07 October 2018).

18 S. Dagher, 'Assad Is Desperate for Soldiers', *The Atlantic*, 14 May 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/syria-assad-conscription-refugees-lebanon/560282/> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

19 Global Firepower, '2018 Syria Military Strength', https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=Syria (last accessed 15 August 2018).

20 M. Alami, 'The Ongoing Israel-Iran Proxy War in Syria', *Atlantic Council*, 8 March 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ongoing-israel-iran-proxy-war-in-syria> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

21 'Seven Iranians Were Killed in Strike on Syrian Air Base: Tasnim', *Reuters*, 10 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/seven-iranians-were-killed-in-strike-on-syrian-air-base-tasnim-idUSKBN1HH0U2> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

22 C. Kube, 'Israel Seems to Be Preparing for War with Iran, U.S. Officials Say', *NBC News*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/israel-seems-be-preparing-war-iran-say-u-s-officials-n870051> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

PARTIES TO THE NON-INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS

In addition, there are various parallel non-international armed conflicts, the main players in which are the Syrian Government, assisted by Russia and Iran, the US-led coalition and various rebel groups, the most important being the FSA, IS, Ahrar al-Sham, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the YPG-YPJ. Turkey should also be mentioned separately as it is engaged in a non-international conflict with the Kurdish militias, which are supported by the US, putting great strain on US-Turkish relations.

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The first organized opposition to the Syrian Government, the FSA, came into being in 2011 when defectors from the Syrian Army organized themselves into a militant group. Since its beginnings, the FSA has expanded and become a loose umbrella term for many armed groups, with little coordination, organized military planning or cohesive ideology. Without support from the Turkish military through intelligence, aerial support and logistics, the FSA would be unable to overpower other militant groups.²³ The FSA together with Turkey have been heavily involved in fighting the Kurdish militia in northern Syria, also known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) who are backed by the US. In March, the FSA took the YPG-controlled city of Afrin.²⁴ Though several FSA branches have shifted alliances, one of their goals is to reduce the influence of the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) at Turkey's southern border.²⁵ As the FSA is a very loose organization with no clear coordination, it is not possible to know how many troops it has.

The most recent attempt to unite the splintering FSA as well as some other rebel groups has come from Turkey with the creation of the United National (or Syrian) Army (UNA) in mid-2017.²⁶ The various groups that comprise the army

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are widely dispersed across Syria and are located in such areas as the South, Ghouta and around Aleppo and Idlib. The UNA has repeatedly clashed with other rebel groups, namely the SDF, IS, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Though the purpose of the union was to unite different rebel groups under one banner, it has not been successful as infighting between different groups continues.²⁷

Islamic State (IS)

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or simply Islamic State (IS), is an extremist group that detached itself from al-Qaeda in 2014 to form its own organization with the aim of creating an Islamic state (caliphate) across Iraq and Syria, which would be governed by Sharia law. It has been extremely successful in recruiting members from across the world with the help of the internet and social media to

diffuse its ideas and propaganda. In its prime, IS controlled 34,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and, in 2015, it was believed to be holding around 3,500 people as slaves.²⁸ It is also one of the wealthiest militant groups in terrorist organization history – in 2014 alone, it earned around \$2 billion from its oil fields, mineral mines, taxes and the banks it controlled.²⁹

By 2017 the group had lost most of its territory, leading to proclamations that the end had come for IS. In October 2017, after the last of the group's strongholds – Raqqa – had fallen to Kurdish fighters, Brett McGurk, US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, tweeted that IS 'once purported as fierce, now [is] pathetic and a lost cause'.³⁰ However, this claim could have been premature as the latest reports claim that there remain anywhere between 20,000 and 30,000 IS troops in Iraq and Syria.³¹ Therefore, it remains a significant threat in both these countries.

23 S. Abboud, 'Who Are Syria's Opposition Alliances?', Al Jazeera, 10 October 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/syria-opposition-alliances-171010075809951.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

24 'Turkish Forces and Free Syrian Army Capture Afrin City', Al Jazeera, 18 March 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/free-syrian-army-group-captures-afrin-city-180318081430817.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

25 F. Najjar, 'What Is the Future of the Syrian Democratic Forces?', Al Jazeera, 25 November 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/future-syrian-democratic-forces-171124110417741.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

26 'Turkey-Backed Opposition to Form New Army in Northern Syria', TRT World, 30 May 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/nea/turkey-backed-rebels-to-form-new-army-in-northern-syria-367931> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

27 Abboud, 'Who Are Syria's Opposition Alliances?'

28 'ISIS Fast Facts'.

29 J. Pagliery, 'Inside the \$2 Billion ISIS War Machine', CNN Money, 11 December 2015, <https://money.cnn.com/2015/12/06/news/isis-funding/index.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

30 J. Burke, 'Rise and Fall of Isis: Its Dream of a Caliphate Is Over, So What Now?', The Guardian, 21 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/21/isis-caliphate-islamic-state-raqqah-iraq-islamist> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

31 R. Pickrell, 'As Many as 30,000 ISIS Fighters May Still Be Crawling Across Iraq and Syria — as Many as at the Height of Their Power', 14 August 2018, Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.fr/us/as-many-as-30000-isis-fighters-still-in-iraq-and-syria-2018-8> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

Ahrar al-Sham

Ahrar al-Sham or Harajat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant) is a Sunni Salafist armed group that aims to replace Assad's regime with an Islamic government. It was formed in 2011 with its first attack taking place in 2012. The group worked together with IS until internal fighting pitted them against each other at the beginning of 2014.³² It has been one of the more powerful and persevering opposition groups throughout the conflict, boasting an estimated 20,000 troops.³³

In February 2018, the group merged with Nour al-Din al-Zenki to form the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) in the governorate of Idlib. This is thought to be an attempt by the two groups to counter Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's influence in Idlib.³⁴

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is a union of five different rebel Islamist organizations, which aims to overthrow the Assad regime and introduce Sharia law in Syria. It is based primarily in the northwestern region of Syria and emerged roughly at the end of 2016/beginning of 2017 when Jabhat Fath al Sham (previously the Al Nusrah Front) merged with four other Islamist groups in the summer of 2016.³⁵ It is currently emerging as one of the strongest opposition groups to Assad's government. It has also been at war with IS in Idlib and Aleppo, announcing in March 2018 that it had taken 25 villages from IS and was in control of most of the area.³⁶ The group has between 7,000 and 11,000 troops.³⁷

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Dominated by the YPG, the SDF is a US-backed alliance of Arab, Turkmen, Armenian and Kurdish fighters. Founded in 2015 to fight IS and other rebel groups, its stated aim is the establishment of a democratic and federal Syria in the northern Rojava region. The Kurdish YPG and its allies pushed IS out, took over a large northern area during 2017 and now controls almost a quarter of Syria.³⁸ In an interview

³² 'Ahrar al-Sham', Mapping Militants Project, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

³³ 'German Prosecutors Charge Two Syrians for Ahrar al-Sham Membership', DW, 18 November 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-prosecutors-charge-two-syrians-for-ahrar-al-sham-membership/a-36444080> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

³⁴ 'Ahrar Al-Sham and Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki Merge to Form New Armed Group in Northern Syria', South Front, 18 February 2018, <https://southfront.org/ahrar-al-sham-and-nour-al-din-al-zenki-merge-to-form-new-armed-group-in-northern-syria/> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

³⁵ B. Brimelow 'A New Terrorist Group Is Popping Up in Syria and Capitalizing on ISIS' Defeat', Business Insider, 19 April 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.fr/us/syria-terrorist-group-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-2018-4> (last accessed 15 August 2018).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ F. Brinley Bruton and A. Cheikh Omar, 'Syria's Civil War Has Been Raging for 7 Years. What's Behind it?', 21 February 2018, NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/syria-civil-war-has-been-raging-7-years-what-n849851> (last accessed 24 November 2018).

³⁸ A. Chughtai, 'Syria's War: Who Controls What?', Al Jazeera, 7 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/05/syria-country-divided-150529144229467.html> (last

with Russia Today in May 2018, President Assad stated that 'the only problem left in Syria is the SDF'. He continued by saying that there are two options to deal with the SDF: negotiations, which the Government claims to have started, or retaking SDF-controlled areas by force. Assad sounded a warning that the US, which is backing the SDF, should learn from Iraq and remove its troops from Syria.³⁹ There is no confirmed information on the number of fighters within the SDF, but rough estimates put the number at 60,000–75,000 personnel.⁴⁰

YPG-YPJ

The most important part of the SDF, the Kurdish People's Protection Units, are separated into two groups: the People's Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) – and the Women's Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (YPJ). The YPG was created in July 2012 and the YPJ in April 2013. They prefer to be referred to as two separate entities and the YPJ joined the SDF separately from the YPG. Both groups aim to 'protect the Kurdish people and their cultural, political, and social existence'.⁴¹ The forces of the two groups are estimated to stand at around 20,000–30,000 fighters. They have generally depended on the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) for their training and military planning.⁴²

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2018

THE DECLINE OF ISLAMIC STATE

Islamic State territory has changed immensely since the peak of the group's power in 2014, when it controlled 34,000 square miles of land across Syria and Iraq. By 2016, 13,000 square miles had already been taken from the group.⁴³ In July 2017, the Iraqi Government retook Mosul from IS, which had been part of the latter's territory since 2014.⁴⁴ But the most important moment was the fall of Raqqa – the heart of the IS-proclaimed caliphate – in October 2017. Part of IS territory since 2014, the city was cleared of the group

accessed 7 October 2018).

³⁹ 'Syria's Assad Vows to Retake Areas Held by US-Backed Kurds', Al Jazeera, 31 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/syria-assad-vows-retake-areas-held-backed-kurds-180531072938002.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

⁴⁰ B. M. Rashid, Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria, Special Report, Omran for Strategic Studies, 24 January 2018, p 7, <http://omranstudies.org/publications/reports/military-and-security-structures-of-the-autonomous-administration-in-syria.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

⁴¹ Ibid., p 15.

⁴² Ibid., p 4.

⁴³ A. Bendaoudi, After the 'Almost 100 Percent' Defeat of ISIS, What About Its Ideology?, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 8 May 2018, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/05/100-percent-defeat-isis-ideology-180508042421376.html> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

⁴⁴ 'Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps', BBC News, 28 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

through heavy airstrikes by the US-led coalition and the SDF troops.⁴⁵ The airstrikes left the city in ruins.

Currently, almost 96 percent of IS-held territory has been retaken.⁴⁶ Iraq's government announced that its war against IS was over in December 2017, while President Trump followed suit, declaring the group 'militarily defeated' in January 2018.⁴⁷ At the start of 2018, IS was holding a small part of the Jazeera Desert and a few towns along the Euphrates River in Syria, a total of around 1,900 square miles.⁴⁸ Surprising its allies, the US announced on 20th December 2018, the full withdrawal of over 2,000 US troops in Syria, declaring victory over the Islamic State.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the threat of IS has not been dissipated and claims that the group no longer poses a threat could be premature. Between 20,000 and 30,000 IS fighters may still exist across Syria and Iraq according to the U.S. Department of Defense and a United Nations panel of experts.⁵⁰ It has been suggested that though IS has become less present on the battlefield, it is simply moving underground and switching to more insurgency-like practices rather than open fighting and governing, which it exercised during most of the Syrian conflict. The strength and attractiveness of IS ideology appears to have allowed the group to survive and remain great in number even after decisive losses on the battlefield. This means that ISIS could remain a problem for many years to come, moving underground when it becomes weak and coming back when its strength is replenished.⁵¹

ASSAD'S TERRITORIAL GAINS

Currently, Assad appears to be emerging as the winner of the Syrian conflict. Of course, the conflict is not over and more battles are probably still to come; nevertheless, the Syrian Government, with the help of Iran-backed militias and Russian aerial bombings, has reclaimed most of Syrian territory from the rebels. Between February and May 2018, the Syrian Government cleared the cities of

45 'US-Backed Forces Clear Up Raqqa After ISIS's Crushing Defeat', Business Insider, 18 October 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-backed-forces-clear-up-raqqa-after-isis-crushing-defeat-2017-10> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

46 Bendaoudi, 'After the 'Almost 100 Percent' Defeat of ISIS, What About Its Ideology?'

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 'Trump shocks allies and advisers with plan to pull US troops out of Syria', The Guardian, 20 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/19/us-troops-syria-withdrawal-trump> (last accessed 07 January 2019).

50 Pickrell, 'As Many as 30,000 ISIS Fighters May Still Be Crawling Across Iraq and Syria'.

51 Bendaoudi, 'After the 'Almost 100 Percent' Defeat of ISIS, What About Its Ideology?'

Homs and Damascus. Meanwhile, between February and April, it retook Eastern Ghouta, ending its five-year siege, the longest in modern history. The campaign was based on continuous bombardment, which reportedly killed more than 170,000 of the 400,000 civilians that resided in the city within eight weeks.⁵² As this was the last rebel stronghold near the capital Damascus, it is an important achievement for Assad. Finally, in July 2018, Assad managed to retake control of the southern Syrian district of Deraa, which

has been under rebel control since the beginning of the war. This is an important strategic and symbolic win for Assad as Deraa is considered to be the 'birthplace' of the 2011 revolt against Assad. Strategically,

reclaiming all these areas has meant that the government has regained its border with Israel and Jordan, which will facilitate international trade.⁵³

Assad's government's territorial gains have been huge and the Syrian as well as Russian and US governments appear to be slowly shifting towards discussions on how to rebuild Syria and when and how to start sending Syrian refugees back home.⁵⁴ At this year's UN General Assembly, Syria's Deputy Prime Minister, Walid al-Moallem, claimed that Syria's fight with terrorism is almost over and the country is getting ready to welcome back more than 5 million refugees who fled during the seven-year war.⁵⁵

The remaining pockets of rebel control are the Idlib province in the northwest, parts of the northeast and the southwest, which looks the most vulnerable as there are no foreign forces stationed there.⁵⁶ Still, Idlib, a stronghold of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, is the key area for Assad in order to end the war, but reclaiming it threatens to be a Ghouta-style disaster for the roughly 2 million civilians that have fled there in search of a safer place.⁵⁷ Luckily, a demilitarization

52 Human Rights Council (HRC), The Siege and Recapture of Eastern Ghouta, Conference Room Paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 June–6 July 2018, UN doc A/HRC/38/CRP.3; M. Patience, 'Syria War: Fall of Eastern Ghouta Pivotal Moment for Assad', BBC News, 13 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43631838> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

53 S. Al-Khalidi, 'Jordan Says Not Yet Ready to Open Border Crossing with Syria', Reuters, 2 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jordan-border/jordan-says-not-yet-ready-to-open-border-crossing-with-syria-idUSKBN1KN2MJ> (last accessed 16 August 2018); 'What Is Happening in Syria? Assad Forces Retake Rebel Stronghold', The Week, 13 July 2018, <http://www.theweek.co.uk/syrian-civil-war/91922/what-is-happening-in-syria-assad-forces-retake-rebel-stronghold> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

54 Mohammed and Stewart, 'Exclusive: Despite Tensions, Russia Seeks U.S. Help to Rebuild Syria'.

55 'Syria FM: Our Battle Against Terrorism "Almost Over"', Al Jazeera, 29 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/syria-fm-battle-terrorism-180929150446410.html> (last accessed 07 October 2018).

56 International Crisis Group, Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria, Report no 187, 21 June 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/187-keeping-calm-southern-syria> (last accessed 16 August 2018).

57 S. Tisdall, 'Putin Holds Winning Cards as Syrian War Nears Idlib Showdown', The Guardian, 21 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/21/syria-idlib-putin-assad>

deal was struck in September over Idlib's control in order to avoid the humanitarian catastrophe that would have ensued if there had been a Syrian military assault. The brokers of the agreement – Russia and Turkey, who are on opposite sides in the conflict – stated that all fighters should leave a designated demilitarization zone and pull out their equipment by mid-October.⁵⁸ A retreat by rebel forces from the zone has already started.⁵⁹ It remains to be seen if the agreement will hold.

WAR CRIMES ALLEGATIONS, INVESTIGATIONS AND PROSECUTIONS

The Syrian conflict has been marred by human rights abuses and crimes committed by many of the parties involved.

The Syrian Government has been accused of using chemical weapons on several counts. The first accusation came in 2013 when Assad's government used a sarin nerve agent in Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, killing 1,400 people. The US president pushed for a strike but could not convince Congress. Nevertheless, the UN Security Council decided on a diplomatic solution, ordering Assad to destroy Syria's chemical weapons and sign the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).⁶⁰ Syria agreed to sign the CWC, which prohibits countries from using, stockpiling or developing chemical weapons. Around 1,300 tonnes of chemical weapons were destroyed; nevertheless, not all the stockpile was eliminated, leaving Syria with the possibility of replenishing its stores. Since then, chemical attacks have not stopped, the most notable of which took place in April 2017, leading to US airstrikes in retaliation and, in April 2018, leading to strikes by the US, France and Britain. Islamic State has also used chemical weapons on at least two counts in 2015 and 2016.⁶¹ The Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has counted, as of January 2018, at least '34 documented incidents of the use of chemical weapons by various parties to the conflict'.⁶²

winners-iran (last accessed 16 August 2018).

58 A. Higgins and R. Gladstone, 'Russia and Turkey Announce Demilitarized Zone in Last Rebel-Held Part of Syria', *The New York Times*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/world/middleeast/idlib-syria-russia-turkey.html> (last accessed 07 October 2018).

59 'Syria Rebels Begin Moving Heavy Arms from Idlib Buffer Zone', *Al Jazeera*, 07 October 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/idlib-rebels-shifting-heavy-arms-planned-buffer-zone-181007111324444.html> (last accessed 07 October 2018).

60 A. Erickson, '6 Basic Questions About the War in Syria', *The Washington Post*, 15 April 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/12/syria-explained/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.70004f866cbe (last accessed 17 August 2018).

61 P. Wintour, 'Why Does Syria Still Have Chemical Weapons?', *The Guardian*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/18/why-does-syria-still-have-chemical-weapons> (last accessed 17 August 2018).

62 HRC, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Press Statement on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Eastern Ghouta, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=22939&LangID=E> (last accessed 17

In July 2018, the Syrian Government published documents with the names of prisoners that have died while in government custody. No comment on how the prisoners died and how many there are overall has been made. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has confirmed 312 recent cases but claims that the Government has detained at least 800,000 people, so more names will follow. Most of the documents show that these people died years ago, at the beginning of the conflict. Human rights groups say that since the conflict began, many people have disappeared in the Government's jails, where torture and mistreatment are rife.⁶³

Furthermore, a recent report on human rights violations during the siege and recapture of Eastern Ghouta has been produced by the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.⁶⁴ According to the report, when recapturing the city, which was subject to the longest siege (five years) in modern history, government forces carried out war crimes, such as launching indiscriminate attacks and attacking protected objects. Government missiles have fallen on homes, markets and hospitals. It is estimated that between 18 February and 11 March 2018, attacks by pro-government forces killed around 1,100 civilians and injured 4,000. For example, on 19 March, pro-government forces launched an airstrike, hitting a school and killing at least 17 children, 4 women and 1 man. Access to food and medicine for the citizens under siege has also been denied, which the Commission has called a 'crime against humanity of inhumane acts causing serious mental and physical suffering'. Hospitals have been targeted so often that it has been suggested that the forces intend to completely erode the health services in opposition areas.



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63 B. Hubbard and K. Shoumali, 'Hundreds Died in Syrian Custody, Government Acknowledges', *The New York Times*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/world/middleeast/syria-detainees-dead.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FSyria> (last accessed 17 August 2018).

64 HRC, *The Siege and Recapture of Eastern Ghouta*.

Collective punishment was carried out by the Government by deliberately starving the besieged civilians and denying them humanitarian aid. Between July 2014 and February 2017, citizens mostly survived because of the existence of a manmade tunnel, which enabled the smuggling of food and medicine. The report concludes that the Government's attacks aimed to instill terror in civilians as well as the opposition.⁶⁵

The report also discusses the indiscriminate attacks carried out by armed groups, especially between February and April 2018. As the Government regained more and more territory, these acts only increased in number and severity. On 20 February, opposition attacks killed 13 civilians; on 20 March, a rocket landed in a food market, killing 44 civilians and injuring hundreds. Arbitrary arrests were also prevalent, often leading to 'cruel treatment and torture, and outrages upon personal dignity'. The report concludes that just like the Government, opposition forces also aimed to instil fear in civilians.

The US-led coalition has also been accused by human rights groups of having committed war crimes during the conflict. During the campaign to retake Raqqa in 2017, the coalition used more than 30,000 artillery rounds and several thousand airstrikes between June and October 2017. The destruction left the city in ruins; nevertheless, the coalition claimed to have only killed 23 civilians, which Amnesty International, for example, does not consider 'accurate, credible, [or] serious'.⁶⁶ After conducting an investigation on the ground, the organization argues that the strikes killed hundreds and injured thousands and were disproportionate and indiscriminate. While British and French forces were involved, most (around 90 percent) of the strikes came from US forces.⁶⁷

THE INTERNATIONAL, IMPARTIAL, AND INDEPENDENT MECHANISM OF SYRIA

In December 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing an International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Amnesty International, 'Syria: US-Led Coalition "Deeply in Denial" About Civilian Casualties in Raqqa', 17 July 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/syria-us-led-coalition-deeply-in-denial-about-civilian-casualties-in-raqqa/> (last accessed 17 August 2018).

⁶⁷ 'Did US-Led Coalition Commit War Crimes in Syria's Raqqa?', Al Jazeera, 5 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2018/06/led-coalition-commit-war-crimes-syria-raqqa-180605175041277.html> (last accessed 17 August 2018).

serious crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 (the Mechanism). According to the resolution, the purpose of the Mechanism is 'to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses' in order to prepare files and facilitate trials in courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes.⁶⁸

In its second report to the General Assembly, the Mechanism reported having already collected around 4 terabytes of evidence consisting of almost 900,000 records.⁶⁹ Material that could assist ongoing national criminal justice processes is prioritized. The Mechanism is also collecting information and evidence to try to 'map crime patterns, examine the contextual elements of core international crimes and understand the links between crimes and individuals, ranging from direct physical perpetrators to perpetrators wielding power and authority over the events'.⁷⁰ Some of its other work has focused on developing strategies to address sexual and gender-based violence and gender issues more broadly.⁷¹ The Mechanism has been engaging extensively with civil society and has been receiving requests for assistance from national criminal justice actors.⁷²

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⁶⁸ International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, 'Mandate', <https://iiim.un.org/mandate/> (last accessed 26 November 2018).

⁶⁹ Report of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes Under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic Since March 2011, UN doc A/73/295, 3 August 2018, pp 4, 1–16.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p 4.

⁷¹ Ibid., p 7.

⁷² Ibid., p 6.

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