

SYRIA

SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER BRIEFING 2018



Humanitarian Figures

6.2 million

Internally displaced persons
(UNOCHA)

364

Deaths September-October
2018 (I Am Syria)

13 million

People in need of aid across
the country (UNOCHA)

3 million

People in hard-to-reach
areas (UNHCR)

377,000

Refugees in camps (UNHCR)

Source: UNOCHA

Highlights

- > Idlib remains the last rebel stronghold in Syria
- > Tehran Summit on Idlib between presidents of Turkey, Iran and Russia
- > Russia to supply Syria with air defence system
- > Iran fires missiles at militants in Syria

Key Developments

- > Various armed groups are operating in the last rebel stronghold of Idlib. Claims vary hugely and the number of radicals/al-Qaeda affiliated terrorists is estimated to be between 10,000 and 100,000.
- > In September, civilians were caught up in airstrikes carried out by Syrian and Russian warplanes. American officials have condoned these military operations in Idlib.
- > The presidents of Turkey, Iran, and Russia met in Tehran to discuss the fate of Idlib, whilst heavy bombardment continued.
- > Russia has blamed Israel for the downing of a Russian military aeroplane by Syrian missiles. In response, they have delivered an air defence system to Syria.
- > Following an attack on a military parade in the Iranian city of Ahvaz, Iran has retaliated by firing a ballistic missile aimed at an Islamic State (IS) base.
- > IS has released six hostages that have been held since July as part of an exchange with the Syrian government.

Context

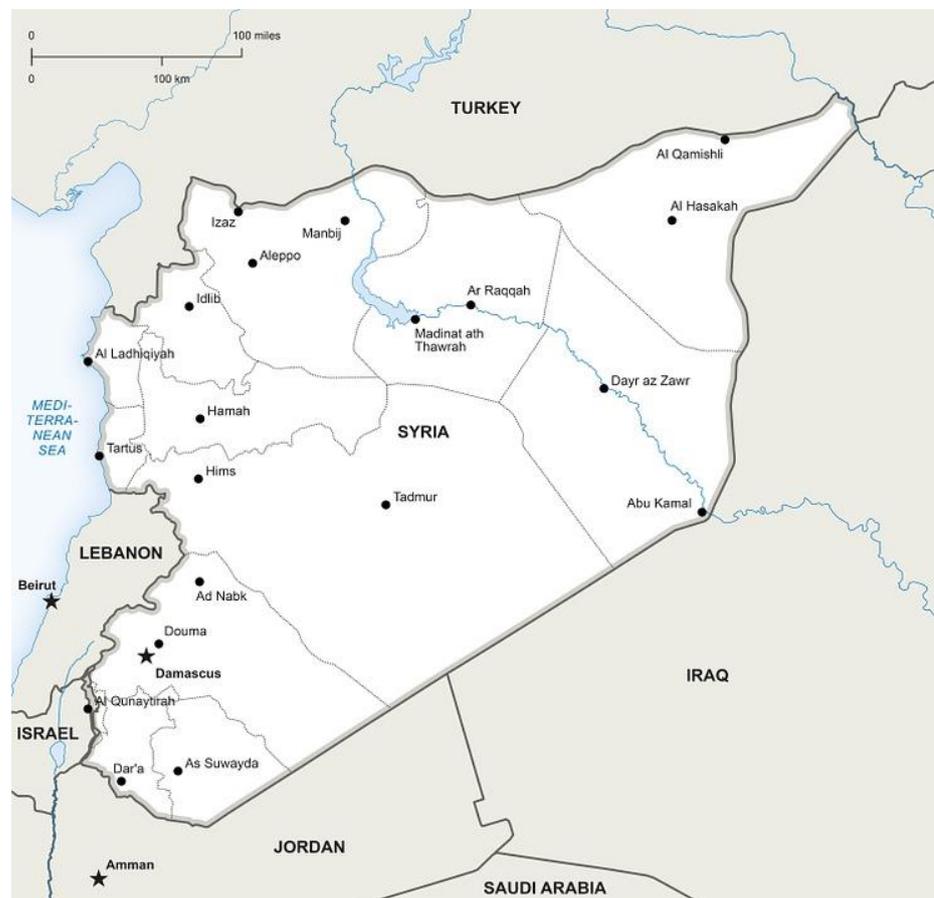
Now in its eighth year, the Syrian conflict has caused devastation to thousands of families, and reduced much of the country to rubble. Roughly [half of the country's 22 million population has been displaced](#), both internally and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries as well as Europe. Millions are in need of humanitarian assistance. In 2011 peaceful protests in Daraa, inspired by the Arab Springs in neighbouring countries, campaigned for a pro-democratic government, however, these were [soon quashed by President Assad](#) and a full-blown civil war ensued.

The conflict is further complicated by the lack of a clear-cut opposition versus Government scenario. Instead, there is the Sunni majority, the President's Shia Alawaite sect, Syria's Kurds and extremist groups, namely the so-called Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda. Government backing is mainly from Russia and Iran, while the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia back the rebels. The international community [has condemned the use of chemical weapons](#); however these have often been used alongside missile attacks and air strikes that have led to significant civilian casualties. Continued military operations and rebel insurgencies over the course of the war have materialised in the gradual migration to the northwestern province of Idlib as the government regains control of Syria's biggest cities, but the impending humanitarian crisis remains as Idlib becomes the target for potential military operations.

Political map of Syria

Starting in Daraa in the south, the conflict has gradually moved northwards through Damascus and its suburbs, to Hamah (Hamah) via Homs and eventually incorporating Aleppo and Raqqa.

HART partner St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) is currently running a project in Maaloula; a town about 50km northeast of Damascus.



Latest Developments

Military Activity

It is estimated that [between 10,000 and 100,000 radicals](#) or al-Qaeda affiliated terrorists are in Idlib. The main armed groups operating in Idlib are:

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a jihadist alliance)
- National Liberation Front (Turkish-backed rebel alliance)
- Hurras al-Din (pro-al-Qaeda HTS offshoot)
- Turkistan Islamic Party (Chinese Uighur-dominated jihadist group)

[4 September](#) – Syrian and Russian warplanes carried out dozens of airstrikes on Idlib, claiming to be targeting the radicals. The White House has threatened military intervention if President Assad uses chemical weapons.

[7 September](#) – nine people have been killed and 20 injured due to the sudden shelling of a Christian majority city in Hama province. A small jihadist faction in Idlib has claimed responsibility.

- The Syrian army responded by shelling opposition-controlled Qalaat al-Madiq area in north western Hama

[10 September](#) – Syrian government forces have attacked rebel-held areas in northwest Syria, killing at least five people on the second day of bombardment. [Turkey has responded](#) by sending more troops into the region

[18 September](#) – a Russian aeroplane has been accidentally shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft fire, killing 15 onboard. [Russia blames Israel](#) for using the Russian plane as a shield while carrying out missile strikes.

[1 October](#) – in response to the 22nd September military parade attack in Ahvaz, Iran has fired six missiles across Iraq and into eastern Syria, targeting the ringleaders of the attack that killed 25 people.

[14 November](#) – airstrikes by the US-led coalition, which has been backing a Kurdish-led alliance, has killed 28 people in eastern Syria, including 22 civilian members of IS family members.

- [In October](#), the US-led coalition was responsible for 46% of civilian casualties from all explosive weapon use in Syria, on ISIS-occupied areas.
- This has resulted in at least 122 civilians casualties.

[19 November](#) – the Syrian army has made a statement claiming the clearance of IS from their final stronghold in the southeastern desert, regaining control of the Tulul al-Safa heights.

Impacts on Civilians

[Turkey fears](#) the potential of an all-out offensive in Idlib will trigger another major refugee crisis on its southern border.

[21 October](#) – ISIS has released two women and four children that they have been holding since July as part of an exchange with the Syrian government. In return, the government will release 60 women, and return a \$27 million ransom.

[Increased aerial bombardments](#) and shelling in southern Idlib and northern Hama has contributed to large scale displacements in the first half of September. Some of the 82,222 IDPs have arrived in Afrin and Jarablus sub-districts due to a perception of relative stability.

[Recent fighting](#) in the southeastern Deir-ez-Zor Governate has trapped at least 10,000 civilians in the ISIL-controlled Hajin enclave.

[Improvised explosive devices](#) and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) left behind by ISIS have led to significant contamination in Raqqa. ERW has restricted access for humanitarian and stabilization organizations from accessing key areas.

Humanitarian Needs

[There is an urgent need](#) for winterization assistance to support the IDP population in northeast Syria, particularly with the significant amount of people living in tents that have been destroyed by adverse weather conditions.

[A drought in the northeast](#) has given rise to concerns over food security and livelihoods, with many people in Al-Hasakeh Governate relying on agriculture as a primary source of income.

[The return of IDPs and refugees](#) to Raqqa has amplified the need for the clearance of explosive remnants.

International Response

[7 September](#) – the Tehran Summit on Idlib witnessed the meeting of the key foreign players in Syria's war (Turkey, Iran, Russia).

- The presidents failed to agree on a ceasefire that would prevent a Syrian government-led offensive in Idlib, however agreed that there could be no military solution and a negotiated political process would be required to end the conflict.
- A call for a truce was further dismissed with the simultaneous airstrikes on Idlib. [Russia and Iran](#) maintain that jihadist groups must be wiped out.

[17 September](#) – Russia and Turkey agreed to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Idlib, separating government forces from rebel fighters.

- Troops from Russia and Turkey will patrol the zone. Under the deal all heavy weaponry operated by rebel groups would need to be pulled out of the buffer zone.

[2 October](#) – Russia has supplied Syria with a S-300 missile system after accusing Israel of indirectly causing the downing of a Russian military jet.