



Syria Alert Issue X

Human security in Syria's liberated areas

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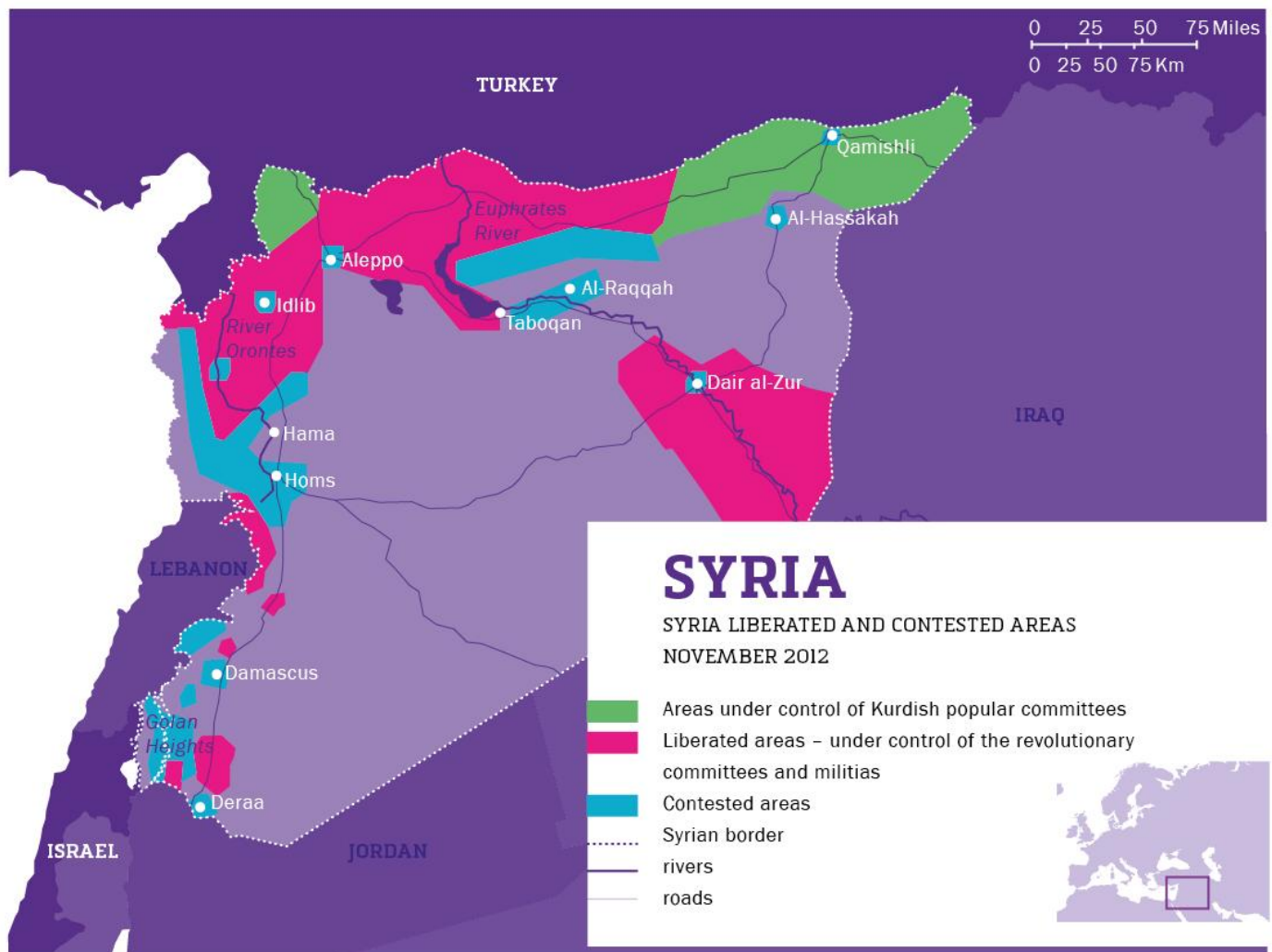
The recent formation of the Syrian National Coalition for the Forces of the Opposition and the Revolution brought a new dynamic in the Syrian revolution and better chances for the European Countries and the EU to have a constructive role. Among the many tasks for the Coalition, one of the main priorities will be to improve the human security in the liberated areas of Syria. The Coalition will need substantial support and aid for this immense task. Rather than taking a 'wait and see' approach, European countries and the EU should start engaging with the Coalition in order to help it to develop the conditions for international cooperation and support. The EU and its member states should support the Syrian opposition to protect citizens in liberated areas themselves.

The Syrian revolutionary movement remains divided. The Coalition is the best option for united leadership and the momentum its formation brought needs international support. The Coalition unites different components and trends of the Syrian revolution, including secular, centre islamists and Muslim Brotherhood, local civil popular committees and councils and a substantial element of the armed factions, activists inside and outside Syria. The leadership, in particular president Sheikh Mouaz al Khatib is widely trusted among the Syrian people. He can serve as a uniting symbol for many in Syria. His peaceful interpretation of Islam and appreciation of diversity can help to build bridges to minorities and others still doubting their support for the revolution. However their authority among some groups including Kurdish parties and Salafist groups is still questionable. Steps to include minority groups in the Coalition and develop a good representation of the different Syrian provinces still need to be taken, but clear international recognition of the Coalition is a necessity both for this process and for the legitimacy, 'weight' and leverage of the Coalition.

Liberated areas

One of the main priorities of the Coalition will be the improvement of the human security situation in the *liberated areas*, the areas that are under full control of the revolutionary forces. In these large parts of the country the Syrian state is no longer present on the ground. The Syrian army and air force is still able to threaten the security of civilians and fighters in these liberated areas. With superior equipment and heavy weapons the Syrian military might still be able to re-conquer liberated areas, but it often chooses to use airstrikes and artillery as a substitute. This is also due to a serious lack of manpower. Many Sunni soldiers and pilots are not allowed to leave their barracks in an attempt to prevent defections, leaving the regime reliant on roughly a quarter of its 300,000-400,000 troops. Even if the military is able to re-conquer liberated areas, the regime is not capable of rebuilding and exerting control over its local governance institutions. Even in suburbs of Damascus the state has disappeared.

As the International Crisis Group states: “the Syrian government has changed into a militia and lost most of its civil functions”¹. The civil institutions of the state are crumbling, even in areas where the state still has a firm grip. Yet, in turn, the FSA is incapable of fully controlling and protecting ‘liberated’ areas. The revolutionary forces are currently advancing on the ground and the last week seems to have been a turning point. It is no longer a question if the opposition will win, but rather when and how. Over the past week, the opposition managed to capture several army bases, took down airplanes and advanced in the greater Damascus area around the road leading to Damascus International Airport. Yet unless without support from abroad, it is hard to imagine how the opposition forces could prevent airstrikes and artillery on their own.



Map made by Schwandt Infographics

Four types of areas no longer under full control of the regime can be distinguished in Syria today:

1. Areas that are ‘liberated’ and ‘relatively safe’, i.e. towns, villages and neighbourhoods that are under full control of revolutionary forces, including their access roads, and that are free from attacks by the Assad-regime. These are the towns and villages in the 6 to 8 km strip along the Turkish border. Turkey has made clear it does not tolerate Syrian ground or air forces in the direct vicinity of its borders after the shelling of Turkish border towns in September, and thus has created a narrow *de facto* no-fly zone. Still, the attack on Atma

¹ ICG report Syria’s mutating conflict: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict.aspx>

near the Turkish border last week shows that even these areas are not completely safe. These areas are ready to start a process of transition and reconstruction. (included in the 'liberated areas' on the map)

2. The areas under control of the Kurdish local committees which are relatively safe and hardly targeted by airstrikes. These areas receive some support from the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government. (in green on the map)
3. Areas that were 'liberated' but are still under attack. These are areas under full control of the revolutionary forces, including their access roads, but transition and reconstruction are hindered by the ongoing shelling from tanks and air raids by the regime. These areas can be found in rural provinces such as Idlib, Al-Raqqa, Deir al-Zur and Deraa. (in pink on the map)
4. Areas in which the revolutionary forces and Assad-forces are still fighting for control. These areas can be found in many parts of the country, including Damascus and its suburbs. (in blue)

Civilians in these areas are at risk from regime bombardments. Especially in the 'liberated but still under attack' areas and in the areas where regime and revolutionary forces struggle for control, human security is the main concern. In the areas where the regime still has troops on the ground, people are at risk of arbitrary arrest, field executions, torture and rape. Even in the 'liberated and relatively safe' areas there are security concerns, because the armed groups that liberated these areas are not put under civil control and try to apply power by force. There are risks of retribution and revenge killing. The lawlessness and governance gap that exists in many areas brings high security risks too. It leaves room for criminal groups, radical armed groups and 'fringe elements' to get foot on the ground.

The second main problem in all four areas is the lack of basic services. In its military campaign to repress the revolution, the Assad regime deliberately targets basic infrastructure. That means hospitals, schools and even bakeries are bombed and destroyed in a campaign to collectively punish the revolutionary population. In the liberated areas, the local councils that took on the management of these services, face problems in returning basic services such as electricity and water because they have no funds and because of the ongoing insecurity. All around Syria, wounded and sick have to be treated in field hospitals (often in private houses or mosques), even in the major cities, because there are no hospitals anymore. Still functioning hospitals are often used and controlled by the regime intelligence forces. Children are missing a second year of school because schools are either destroyed, used as detention centres or as shelters for internal displaced persons (IDP's).

In the four types of areas, different actors on the ground are trying to fill the governance gap in the various stages of conflict and transition. In the liberated and safe areas, local civil councils have been elected and put in charge of the democratic transition and reconstruction processes. There are also military councils that represent the armed groups that liberated these areas. There is still no clear division of roles and responsibilities. Whereas in some areas these civil and military actors are able to cooperate, in other areas they are rival powers. In the 'liberated areas under attack', it is difficult to establish governance structures due to the insecurity. There, the local civil leaders are working more underground and cannot have open meetings and offices. In the areas where fighting is still taking place, local activists work underground to provide services through a parallel system trying to replace and counter the regime. They are a mix of civil society activists, citizens that are active under the umbrella's of 'revolutionary councils' or 'local committees', and armed groups.

As stated, even in the areas where the Syrian army is absent on the ground, the population still suffers seriously from artillery and air strikes. Most opposition factions, including most civil groups, call for supplying more arms to the opposition forces. They argue that the 'Friends of Syria' should give the Syrians at least a chance to protect themselves. So far mainly Arab countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have provided the opposition with arms. Most of these are light weapons and are no match for the heavy weaponry of the regime. Anti aircraft missiles that could be used to protect the liberated areas from air strikes have so far not been delivered openly. As stated, the Gulf states have not acted on their own, but coordinated their supply of weapons with the US; they have not supplied weapons such as Surface to Air missiles that the US would not like to end up in the hands of terrorist groups. One could say the opposition has received the arms to fight the war in Syria, but has been denied the arms to win it. There is a stockpile of several thousand older-generation, anti-aircraft weapons in the hands of the Syrian army. The opposition forces have been able to obtain some through the stocks of the Assad army they captured. On November 28th the FSA claimed it had brought down nine warplanes and helicopters in 48 hours.

Improvement of the Human Security situation in liberated areas

At present, an operation to protect civilians in Syria from outside seems unlikely and undesirable. After the quick intervention in Libya during the revolution in 2011, the Syrian opposition and population probably expected more of the 'Responsibility to Protect' intention of the international community. Yet while Russia and China block any decision on the protection of Syrian civilians in the UN Security Council, there is little appetite in either Western and Arab countries to get involved in a similar operation in Syria. Countries like Qatar, Turkey and France proposed the creation of protected areas or a no-fly zone, but do not get substantial support. Enforcing a no-fly zone with a UN mandate over the liberated areas seems unlikely at present. The more realistic option to improve the human security situation in the liberated areas would be to help the Syrian opposition to protect themselves.

First of all, the National Coalition of the Forces for Opposition and Revolution needs to be recognized internationally as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Gulf countries, Turkey and France have already taken that step. The EU Foreign Affairs Council has stated it recognizes the Coalition as 'legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the Syrian people'. IKV Pax Christi suggests that the EU and European countries should not stick to a 'wait and see' approach, but actively engage with the Coalition representatives to assist in a process towards full official bilateral cooperation. Important milestones for the opposition to reach would be:

- The establishment of a provisional transition government which can clearly demonstrate it represents the broad majority of the Syrian people
- A declaration it will respect International Law
- The development of a mechanism to see that the armed factions respect human rights and international law, and
- Clear steps to secure effective civil control over the armed factions

A second step would be to assist local civil councils to rebuild, in coordination with the Syrian National Coalition, civil institutions in liberated areas. Material support for basic services such as water, electricity, food and health care in the liberated areas is a necessity. Local civil councils will need targeted capacity building to help them to fill the role of the absent local government. In particular the 'relatively safe areas' and the Kurdish areas along the Turkish border should be focus areas for humanitarian aid and reconstruction in the first stage.

A third element would be to assist the Coalition on the national level and civil councils on the local level to establish civil control over the different armed groups. A remarkable portion of the

opposition holds civic values which form the basis of their (armed) struggle. With the security structures of the state absent, the revolutionary forces are also seen by local councils as the only possible actors to overcome the security gap. There are serious allegations of human rights violations by revolutionary armed groups. Atrocities by armed groups have been followed by wide condemnation by civil as well as armed groups. Activists have formulated codes of conduct for the FSA that were accepted by several brigades. Religious leaders have called with some positive effect for ethic behaviour. The present leadership of the Coalition and the local civil councils and committees has at least the moral authority needed to establish civil control. Targeted capacity building and support is essential.

Yet, with these steps, the human security situation in liberated areas will only partially improve. The main threat remains the artillery shelling and air strikes by the Syrian army, and the question how the International Community fulfils its Responsibility to Protect is not off the table. If the Coalition is indeed recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, recognition of the right to self defence would be a logical next step.

Syria Alert is a policy letter published by the Dutch peace movement IKV Pax Christi
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