



# ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**his paper sheds light on the updated map of control in the eastern regions of Syria (al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor), and focuses on explaining how the local actors in the area adopted to different situations. Since 2018, the area has witnessed several major changes in the con-

trol map as new powers emerged and old powers disappeared. The paper attempts to show how the presence of international powers has changed since 2018 and how the local actors exerted their influence on specific areas in direct/indirect coordination with the international forces. The paper also aims to mention in details all the local actors in the eastern front, and give a clear

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idea about the international actors in eastern Syria and the reasons of their presence.

## 1. THE EVOLUTION OF CONTROL AND INFLUENCE IN EASTERN SYRIA

The eastern regions in Syria have undergone several changes regarding the map of influence and control since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. At the beginning of the conflict, opposition forces were able to control large parts of Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor, and al-Raqqa, but due to problems related to poor coordination and management, the opposition factions were unable to hold the eastern regions, which allowed ISIS to appear in these areas and then spread to a vast region between 2015 and 2016 at peak of its power.

In September 2015, the US formed the international coalition forces, whose sole and primary goal was to fight ISIS in various eastern governorates, as well a new local body that included the YPG forces and other Arab units. Thus, it was announced in October 2015 that the YPG/SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) was to become the first local ally of the international coalition at military, security, and administrative levels. Since its formation, the structure of YPG/SDF has

undergone changes, as new formations joined and others left. Yet, the group emerged as a strong actor in the eastern region during the international coalition's fight against ISIS in the city of al-Raqqa in 2017 and later, during the battles of Deir ez-Zor and southern Hasakah in late-2018.

During the conflict between YPG/SDF and ISIS, the regime forces played a major role in the eastern front. However, it was ISIS who controlled most of the rural areas in the south of Deir ez-Zor, and was able to besiege the regime forces in the city of Deir ez-Zor. In 2017, with direct support from foreign and local militias loyal to Iran, the regime forces were able to break the siege on the city of Deir ez-Zor and regain control of the city of al-Bukamal and its border crossing with Iraq.

Therefore, we can say that the first phase directly changing the map of control and influence in eastern Syria was the fight against ISIS. In this phase, which started in early-2018 and ended in 2019, major changes took place whereby ISIS was reduced from a state into hidden cells. Yet, to this day, the organization still continues its fast and rapid attacks on the regime forces and the YPG/SDF in its areas of control in the governorates of al-Hasakah, al-Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

With the end of 2019, the second phase began, which witnessed the start of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in cooperation with the Syrian National Army in areas held by the YPG/PYD/SDF on the border strip between the cities of Tal Abyad in al-Raqqa governorate and the city of Ras al-Ain in al-Hasakah governorate. By the end of October 2019, the Turkish forces and the National Army forces gained control over an area of 3,800 square km, extending from the cities of Tal Abyad to Ras al-Ain, in a radius of 25 to 30 km.

The Operation Peace Spring obviously had a direct impact in changing the map of control and influence in the eastern regions of Syria (al-Raqqa and al-Hasakah) at local and international levels, as the region witnessed the deployment of new local forces and conclusion of various international agreements in an attempt by the international powers to curb the conflict.

The following Diagrams explain in detail and give insight into the local and international dynamics in eastern Syria during the two different phases since 2018.

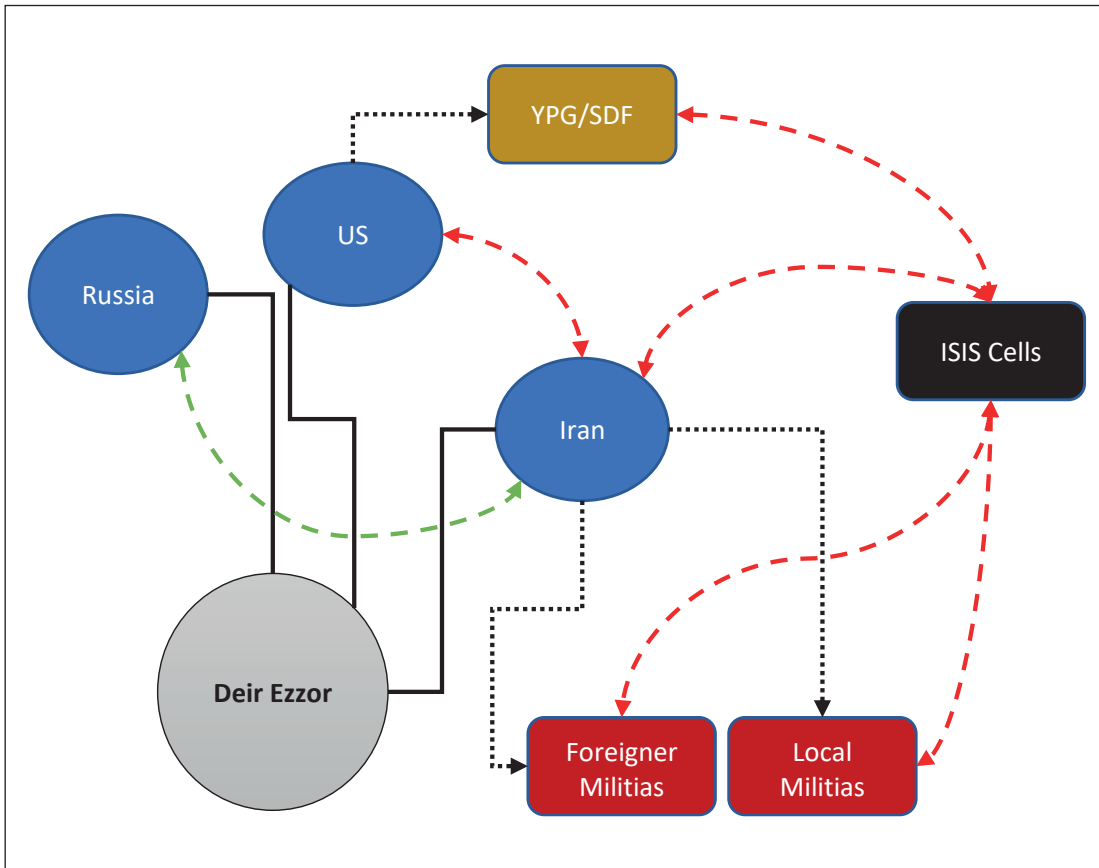


Diagram - 1: Network control diagram during the first phase in Deir ez-Zor

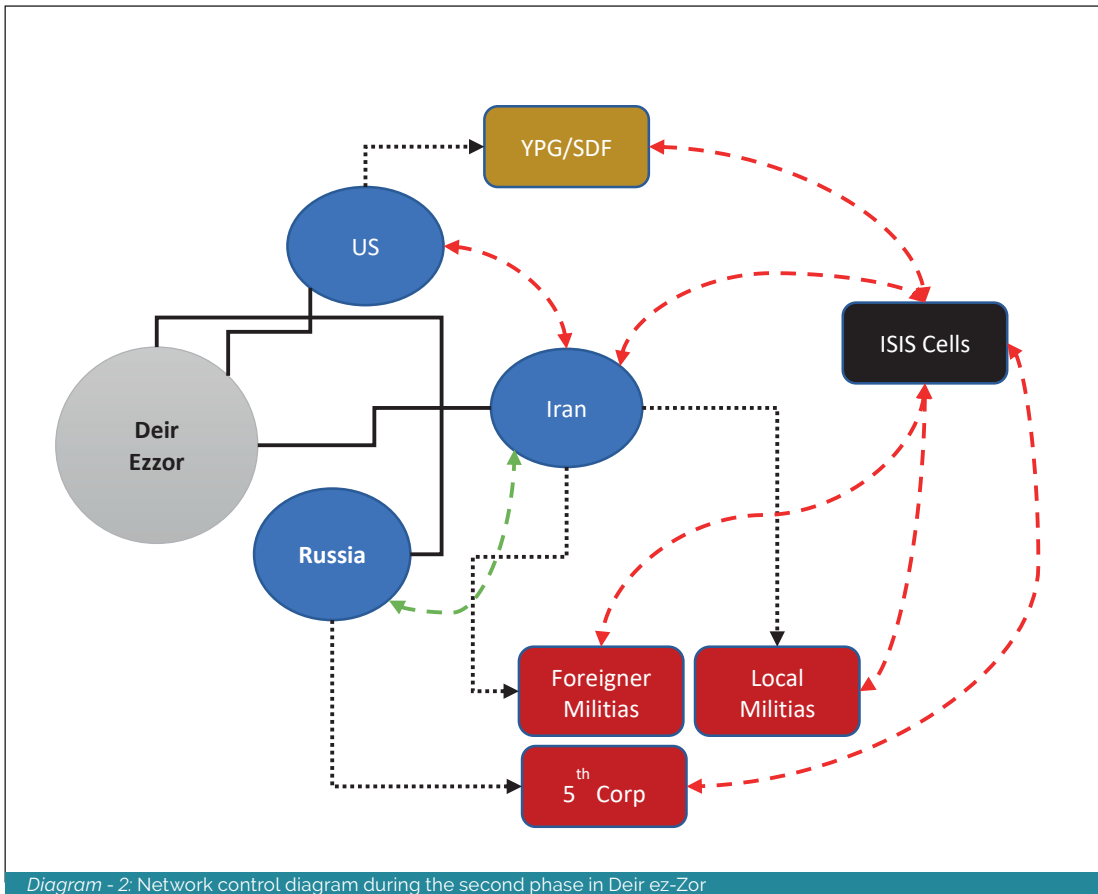


Diagram - 2: Network control diagram during the second phase in Deir ez-Zor

The above two diagrams show how the map of control and influence in Deir ez-Zor governorate changed in the period 2018-2019. The most prominent change occurred when Russia began mobilizing its affiliated local forces in Deir ez-Zor, most notably in areas where the Fifth Corps and the al-Quds Brigade were located. The move in Deir ez-Zor aimed to achieve several goals, particularly:

1. Limiting the attacks of ISIS cells on the road between Deir ez-Zor and the city of Sukhnah in Homs governorate, thereby securing the triangle be-

tween Shlul in Deir ez-Zor, Sukhnah in Homs, and al-Tabqa in Raqqa.

2. Limiting the spread and area of control of the pro-Iran militias in the region. Russian presence in Deir ez-Zor was previously a matter of direct concern for Iran. However, in the current period both Russia and Iran provide benefits to each other as Russian presence may reduce the Israeli raids on Iranian sites in Deir ez-Zor, and Russia needs the Iranian support in its military campaign against ISIS cells, thanks to Iranian militia's experience in the area.

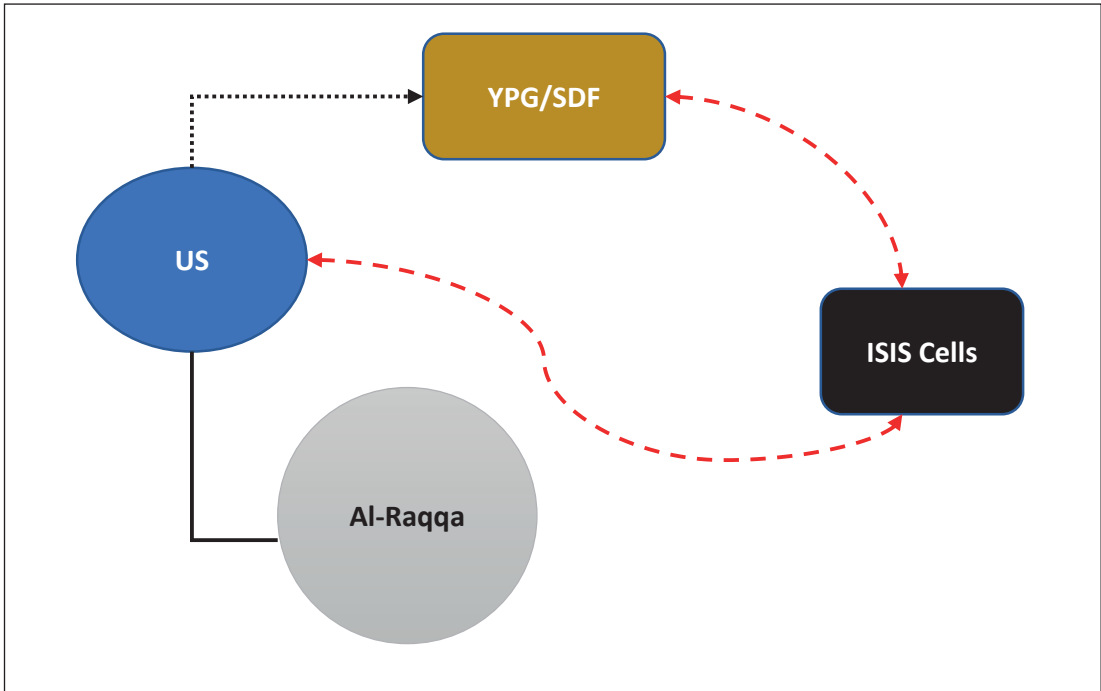


Diagram - 3: Network control diagram during the first phase in al-Raqqa

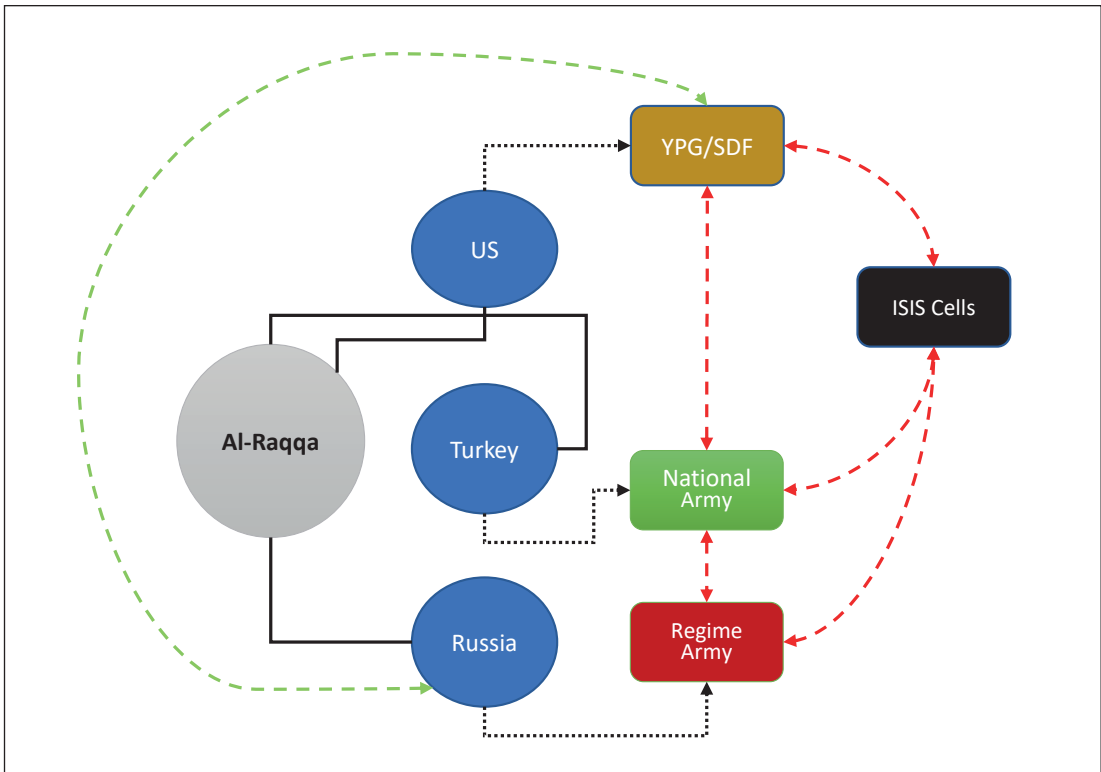
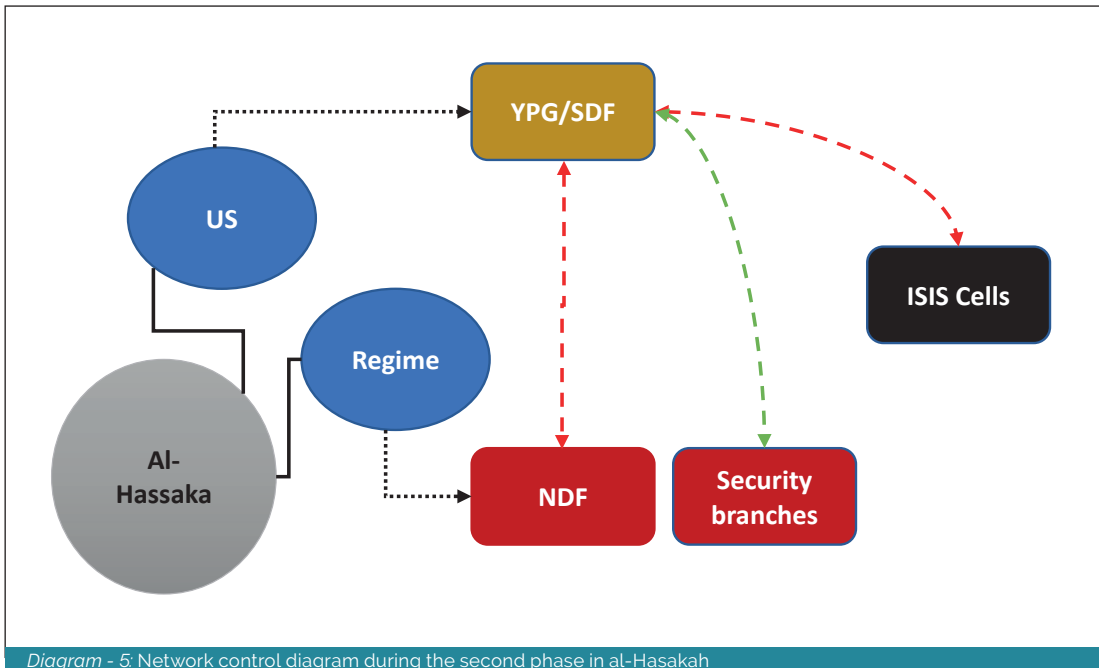


Diagram - 4: Network control diagram during the second phase in al-Raqqa

The changes in the control and influence map in al-Raqqa governorate are clear, and the two phases were demonstrated for the period 2019-2020. In the first phase, the YPG/SDF was able, with the support of the coalition forces, to secure the governorate of al-Raqqa from the north all the way to the city of al-Tabqa. The situation remained the same until 2020, when the Turkish army announced its Operation Peace Spring in cooperation with the Syrian National Army and the battle began following the US withdrawal from several locations in al-Raqqa governorate.

Operation Peace Spring resulted in the Turkish side and the National Army taking control of the area extending from Tal Ab-

yad to Ras al-Ain in al-Hasakah governorate, and it was clear that the Turkish side wanted to continue the campaign, considering the progress achieved in the governorates and the absence of the US. On the other hand, there was also opportunity for the Russian side and the regime forces to impose themselves on the YPG/SDF and present themselves as the only actors capable of preventing the advance of Turkey and the National Army. This was indeed the case and a ceasefire was established through several international agreements between Turkey and the US, as well as Turkey and Russia. Thus, Operation Peace Spring and the new agreements result in a complete change in the map of control and influence, as shown in Diagram 4.



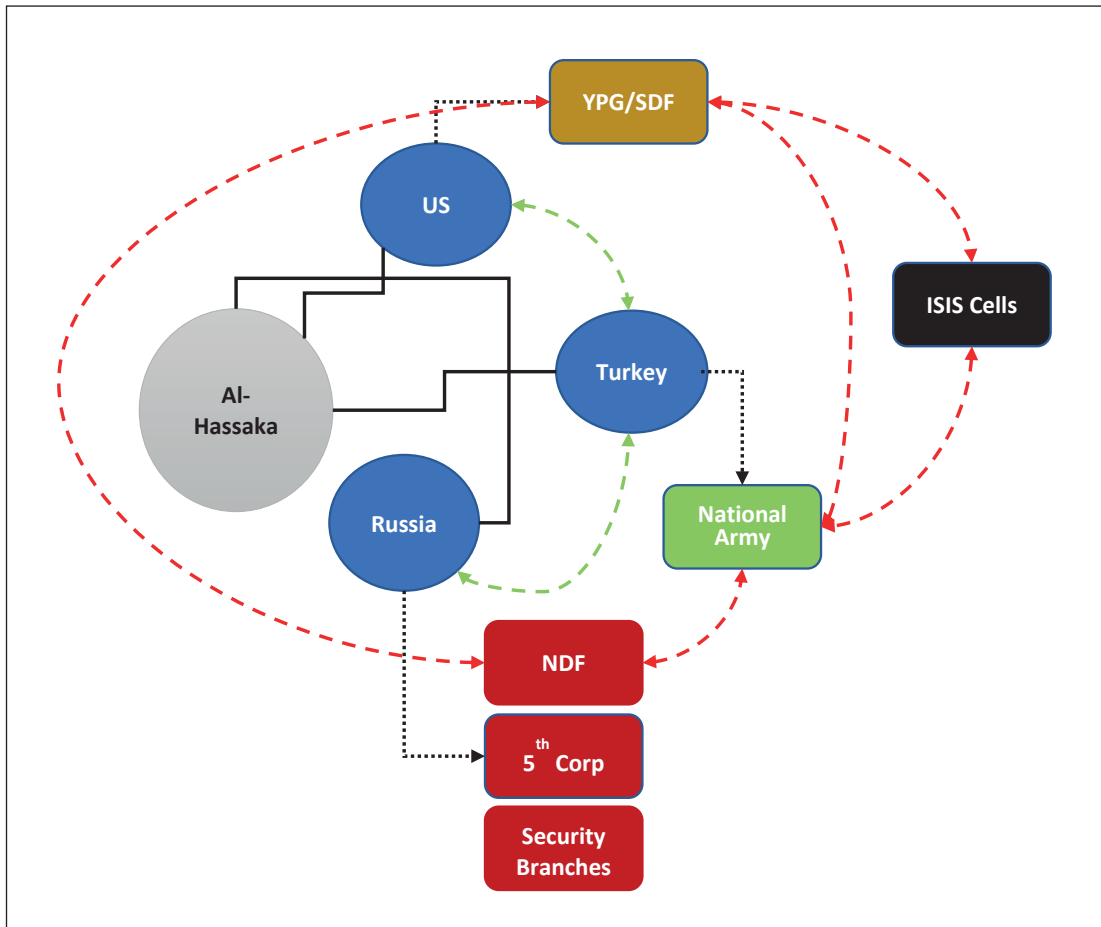


Diagram – 6. Network control diagram during the second phase in al-Hasakah

Diagram 5 and 6 give a clear idea about the complexity of the changes in terms of the influence and control map during the period 2018-2020. Perhaps the most prominent factors that triggered these changes were as follows:

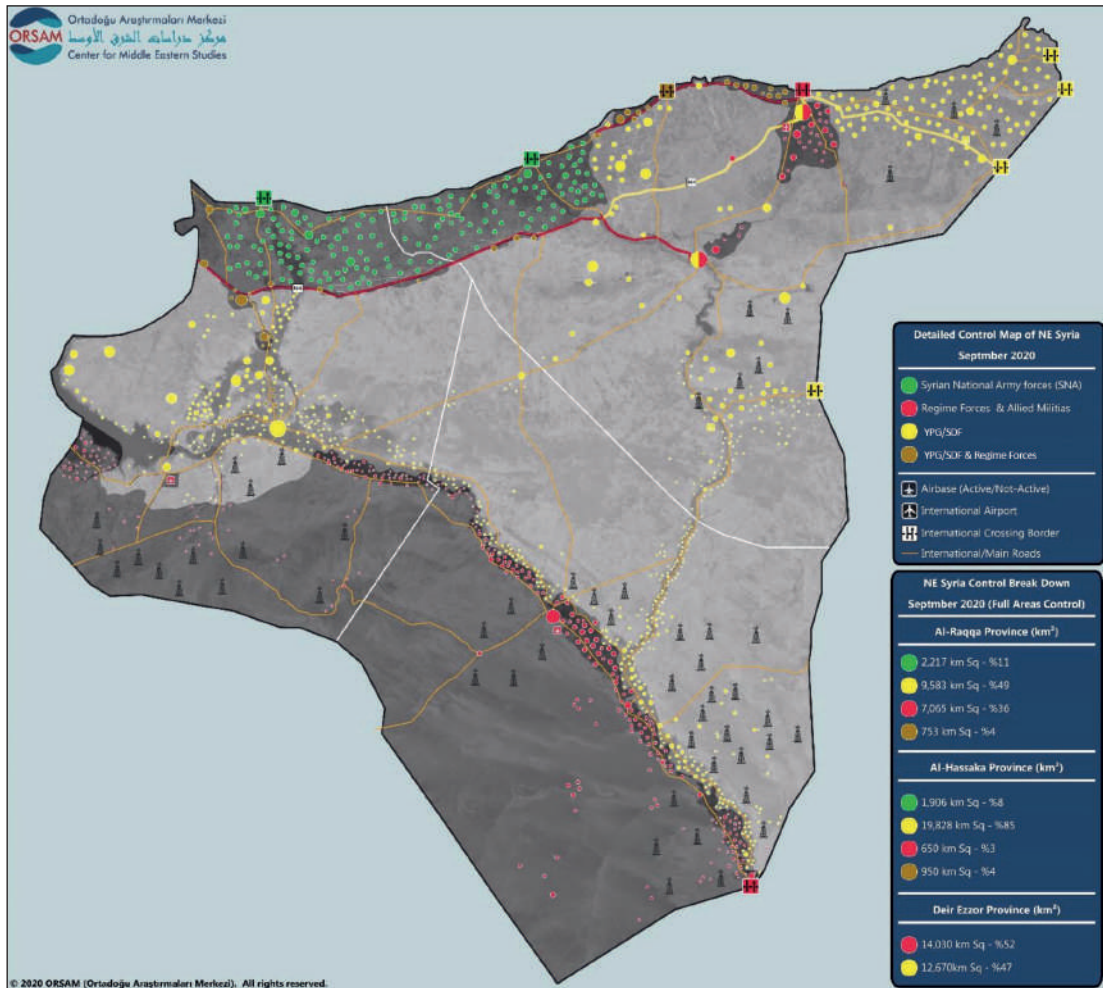
- Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in cooperation with the National Army
- The withdrawal of the US army from several locations from the west to the east of al-Hasakah

- The vacuum left by the US withdrawal, which seemed like an invitation to the Russian side to increase its interference in the governorate.

It is worth mentioning an important point that was not mentioned in the above figures, which is the Iranian activity in al-Hasakah through its local militia. This activity has not reached a level to be considered as influence, but nonetheless played a role in some economic and security fields that will be explained later in another paper.



## 2. SYRIAN NORTHEAST REGION CONTROL BREAKDOWN



Below tables show the international influence and presence in the NE governorates (Al-Raqqah, Al-Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor). The figures were calculated based on the following criteria:

1. Size and type of the military presence based on the number of bases, check-points, and patrols

2. Size and type of the effect on the administration power in the area

3. Political role

4. Relationship with the local community

Each of the 4 criteria listed above were graded in a scale of 0-25 (25 indicating that the effect is at its highest level and 0 indicating that there is no effect). The ratings



were determined based on interviews with local figures and data from open sources. Data-collecting team led by Navvar Saban at ORSAM conducted 5 interviews in the opposition-held areas captured during Operation Peace Spring, and 1 interview in the

regime-held areas both in al-Raqqa and in al-Hasakah, and 3 interviews in the YPG/SDF-held areas in al-Raqqa and al-Hasakah. The interviews were held with prominent people in their communities.

*Table 1: International influence and presence in Al-Raqqa*

Al-Raqqa						
	Presence	Size of Military Presence	Administration Role	Political Role	Relationship with Community	Final Influence Result
Turkey	Yes	25	15	20	15	75
US	Yes	15	20	25	20	80
Russia	Yes	10	0	15	10	35
Iran	Yes	5	0	0	5	10

*Table 2: International influence and presence in Al-Hasakah*

Al-Hasakah						
	Presence	Size of Military Presence	Administration Role	Political Role	Relationship with Community	Final Influence Result
Turkey	Yes	25	10	15	10	65
US	Yes	25	20	25	20	90
Russia	Yes	15	0	15	5	35
Iran	No	0	0	0	5	5

*Table 3: International influence and presence in Deir ez-Zor*

Deir ez-Zor						
	Presence	Size of Military Presence	Administration Role	Political Role	Relationship with Community	Final Influence Result
Turkey	No	0	0	0	0	0
US	Yes	25	20	20	20	85
Russia	Yes	15	5	5	5	30
Iran	Yes	25	20	20	25	90

## Analysis of Territorial Control in Northeast Syria

Table - 4: Local forces' percentage of control in NE governorates

	Governorate Area km <sup>2</sup>	Regime Forces	Joint area (Regime & YPG)	YPG/ YPG/ SDF	Opposition Forces (SNA)	Liberation Front	HTS
Al-Raqqah	18.482 km <sup>2</sup>	52%	8%	16%	22%	-	2%
Al-Hasakah	6.097 km <sup>2</sup>	49%	-	-	10%		41%
Deir ez-Zor							

Table - 5: Control of M4 international road in NE governorates

	M4 Length (Km)	Regime Forces	Joint area (Regime & YPG/YPG/SDF)	YPG/ SDF	Opposition Forces (SNA)
Al-Hasakah	227 Km	24%	15%	61%	-
Al-Raqqah	102 Km	65%	35	-	-

Table - 6: Situation of the international crossing border in NE governorates during March 2021 2020

	Governorate	Local Forces	International Influence	Humanitarian	Commercial	NGO Staff	Civilians
Al-Bukamal	Deir ez-Zor	LDF	Iran	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Tal Safwk	Al-Hasakah	YPG/SDF	-				Closed
Yarubiyah	Al-Hasakah	YPG/SDF	-				Closed
Samalka	Al-Hasakah	YPG/SDF	US	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ain Diwar	Al-Hasakah	YPG/SDF	-				Closed
Al-Qamishli	Al-Hasakah	Regime	-				Closed
Darbasiyah	Al-Hasakah	YPG/SDF	-				Closed
Ra's al-Ain	Al-Hasakah	SNA	Turkey	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Tel Abiad	Al-Raqqah	SNA	Turkey	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



Competition of regional powers in the Northeast Syria.

## CONCLUSION

The regional and international struggles in Syria have escalated to new levels and signal that the situation will become even more complex, particularly with the US announcement in 2021 regarding its long-term objectives in Syria. This confirms Washington's intention to stay for a long time in the eastern regions of Syria. The US will continue to be among the actors in the region with clashing interests and goals in the Syrian geography. The main goal of the US in Syria is the elimination of ISIS, but the major changes in the eastern region that led to the emergence of new international and local actors caused the US administration to assume 3 other goals in Syria: driving Iran and its militias out of the country, changing the outcome of the Syrian war to its benefit, and achieving stability in the northern regions.

For Russia, recent military reinforcements to the regions in northern and eastern Syria are part of a "stabilization" effort, especially after the recent escalation of tension between Turkey and the YPG in the vicinity of Ain Issa, which almost resulted in a military confrontation. Moscow seems to be attempting to make a new military interven-

tion to the regions in eastern Syria at the expense of the YPG, which receives logistic and military support from the US. Since its first intervention in eastern Syria in late-2019, Moscow has been pursuing an unclear strategy so far. However, it supports the Syrian regime, playing it against Turkey on one hand and against the US on the other.

The first priority of Turkey regarding the east of the Euphrates is to eliminate the PYD/YPG with all its elements. Turkey is focused primarily on securing the border and is closely following the implementation of the agreement with Russia signed after Operation Peace Spring. According to this agreement, the area up to 32 km from the border shall be a safe corridor free from the PYD/YPG. Although Russia and regime forces have entered this region, the PYD/YPG has not withdrawn and remains as the most influential actor. Turkey will first engage diplomatically with Russia for the fulfillment of the terms of this agreement, but it will also resort to coercive measures against the YPG, as was the case in Ain Issa. Failure of these efforts may bring cross-border operations such as Operation Peace Spring to the agenda in the long run.

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Navvar Saban, received his MBA from the Australian University of Wollongong in Dubai – and his Bachelor's in Computer Science from the American University in Dubai, in addition to his Diploma in Military Studies from Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University in Istanbul. He currently works as conflict analyst and expert at Omran Center for Strategic Studies and as visiting researcher at ORSAM. He prepares special military maps, reports, and articles about Syria and the broad region. He is specialized in the Iranian influence in Syria, focusing on the militias' activities from a military, economic and administration perspective.



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