

THE THREAT OF ISIS PRISON BREAKS

An Analysis of Camp-Adjacent Violence

Before and After the October 2019 Turkish Invasion



Introduction

With the Syrian conflict soon posed to enter its ninth year, the war has proven to be the greatest humanitarian and international security crisis in a generation. However, in the last year—at least in north-east of the country—there had been relative peace. The Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), along with American support, had consolidated its control of the region and all but rooted out the last remnants of ISIS. As of this fall, U.S. and SDF forces were engaged in counter-terrorism raids, ensuring that the now-stateless Islamic State remained suppressed.

On the other side of the Syrian border sits Turkey, which considers the SDF to be directly tied to the PKK, a terrorist organization that has been in conflict with the Turkish state for decades. This, combined with domestic political pressure to resettle the millions of Syrian refugees currently residing within its borders, led Turkey to formulate a plan to invade SDF-held territory and establish a “buffer zone” in the border region.

The United States, eager to protect its wartime partners and to prevent the destabilizing effects of a Turkish incursion in the region, had negotiated a shaky truce with Turkish forces (elsewhere in Syria) to prevent their planned invasion of SDF territory. With joint U.S.-Turkish patrols and the stationing of U.S. troops in strategic outposts, that truce held. However, on October 8, President Trump—against the advice of his military advisors—acquiesced to Turkish pressure and withdrew U.S. troops from forward positions in the region. The following day, the Turkish military and allied Syrian militias launched their invasion.

One of the biggest concerns (in addition to widespread reports of atrocities) regarding this Turkish invasion has been the implications for the fight against ISIS. SDF territory held numerous ISIS detention camps and IDP camps (which housed ISIS-affiliated family members). Since the invasion, there have been numerous reports of ISIS prison breaks and escapes. Given the now chaotic situation in NE Syria, these breakouts threaten to aid in a potential re-emergence of ISIS. Current news reporting on the details of this breakouts remains spotty and inconsistent.

This project seeks to answer to following questions:

- 1) Where were the biggest increases in violence following the Turkish invasion of NE Syria?
- 2) Which ISIS detention and IDP camps (that house ISIS family members) witnessed the biggest increase in violence in their surrounding area?
- 3) Which camps changed faction hands?

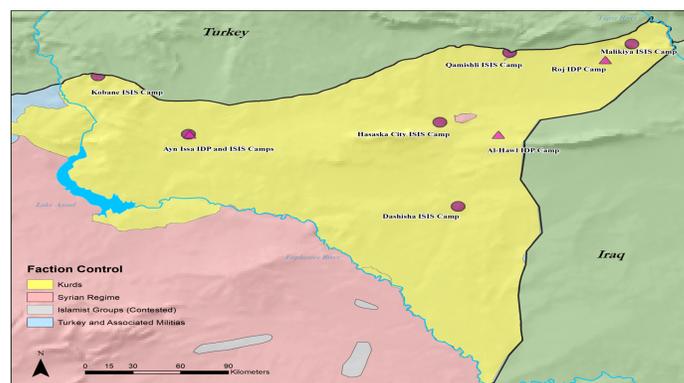
The answers to these questions will serve as an approximate estimation of which camps likely had the most security resources diverted from them during invasion and were thus most vulnerable to ISIS escapes and breakout attempts.

Methodology

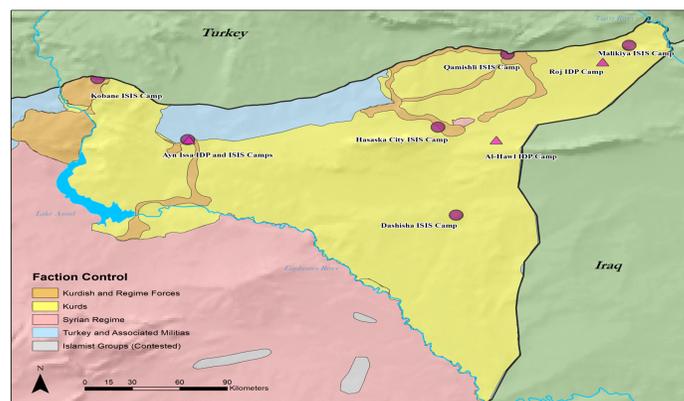
Using The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data, the kernel density tool was applied at a 15,000 km² radius. This tool was applied for the time periods before and after the Turkish invasion (September 2-October 8; October 9-November 16, 2019) The difference between these two densities was then calculated.

A buffer of five km was then applied around each camp (to

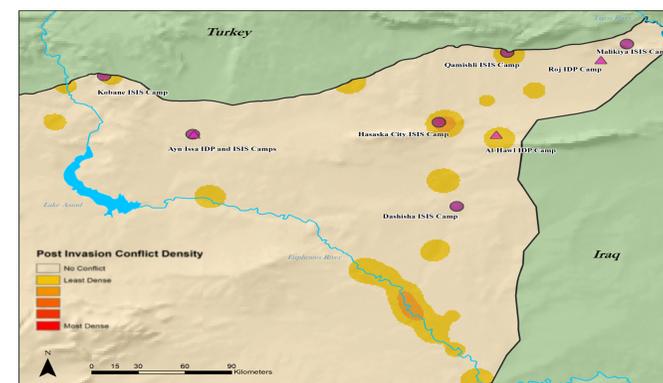
Faction Control (as of October 9, 2019)



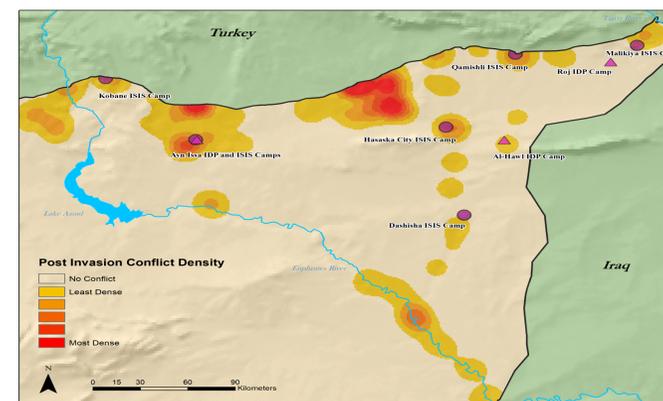
Faction Control (as of November 16, 2019)



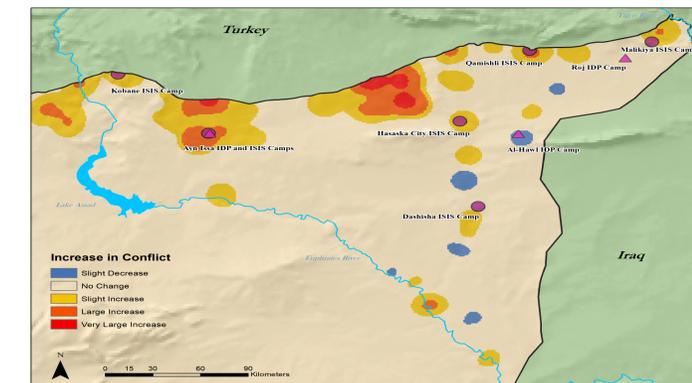
Density of Conflict (September 2-October 8, 2019)



Density of Conflict (October 9-November 16, 2019)



Change in Conflict Density over Both Time Periods



Name of Camp	Population	% Change in Violence Near Camp	Pre-Invasion Faction Control	Post-Invasion Faction Control
Al-Hawl IDP Camp	68,600	-50	SDF	SDF
Ayn Isa IDP Camp	12,901	4,501	SDF	SDF-Regime
Roj IDP Camp	1,700	0	SDF	SDF
Kobane ISIS Camp	N/A	289	SDF	SDF-Regime
Ayn Isa ISIS Camp	N/A	3,902	SDF	SDF-Regime
Dashisha ISIS Camp	N/A	400	SDF	SDF
Hasaska City ISIS Camp	N/A	39	SDF	SDF-Regime
Qamishli ISIS Camp	N/A	188	SDF	SDF-Regime
Malikiya ISIS Camp	N/A	1,305	SDF	SDF

account for errors in the georeferencing of camp locations). From here, the zonal statistics as table tool was used to calculate the percent difference in violence density around the camps between the two time periods.



Results

Although nearly all camps witnessed a large increase in violence following the invasion, regions surrounding the Ayn Issa ISIS camp, Ayn Issa IDP camp, and Malikiya ISIS camp saw a four digit percent increase in conflict. In the absence of complete, accurate reporting on prison escapes, authorities would be wise to pay special consideration to these camps (and their imate

records) while investigating potential escapes. Although over half of the total camps changed faction hands during the invasion, none ended up in Turkish control. Instead, those that changed hands now (as of November 16, 2019) lay in joint SDF-Syrian Regime control, as the two formerly antagonistic factions allied themselves following the Turkish incursion. We would thus not suspect this change to increase likelihood of escape.

Limitations

In order to compute the conflict densities, this analysis utilized all reported conflict events. As such, it does not differentiate between event magnitude or type. Such an analysis, which ideally would incorporate number of units involved, number of casualties, ect... would serve as a better approximation of which camps' security was most at threat. However, in the absence of this far more intricate analysis, this project serves as a general estimate of which camps witnessed the greatest amount of violence, and thus the greatest likelihood of prisoner escape.

Additional Information

Cartographer: Evan Corcoran

Date: December 15, 2019

MAP Data Sources: OSCHA ROSC, ACLED, Natural Earth, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Syria.liveumap

Projection: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 37N

Course: DHP P207 GIS for International Applications

Photos: Scott Bob, Voice of America News; Sahem Rababah, UN Photo

