

Rojava Advisory: 13 November 2019

Summary

The balance of power in Rojava has shifted dramatically since the Turkish incursion began on 9 October. Consequently, reporting from Rojava - which had served as a popular destination for media covering the Syrian conflict and Islamic State operations - is much more complicated.

Principle threats and challenges facing journalists operating in Rojava are:

- Battlefield-related violence in the vicinity of the frontlines.
- Arrest or detention from the Syrian Government Forces or their Russian allies.
- Becoming victim to a re-emerging Islamic State (IS) fighters and allies.
- Complicated medical extraction if seriously injured.

HP Risk Management has been supporting journalists covering events in Rojava, Syria. This advisory provides an assessment and situational outlook for the current safety of media workers reporting in the region. It is critical to note, however, that ground dynamics can shift with little warning and the information given is subject to rapid change.

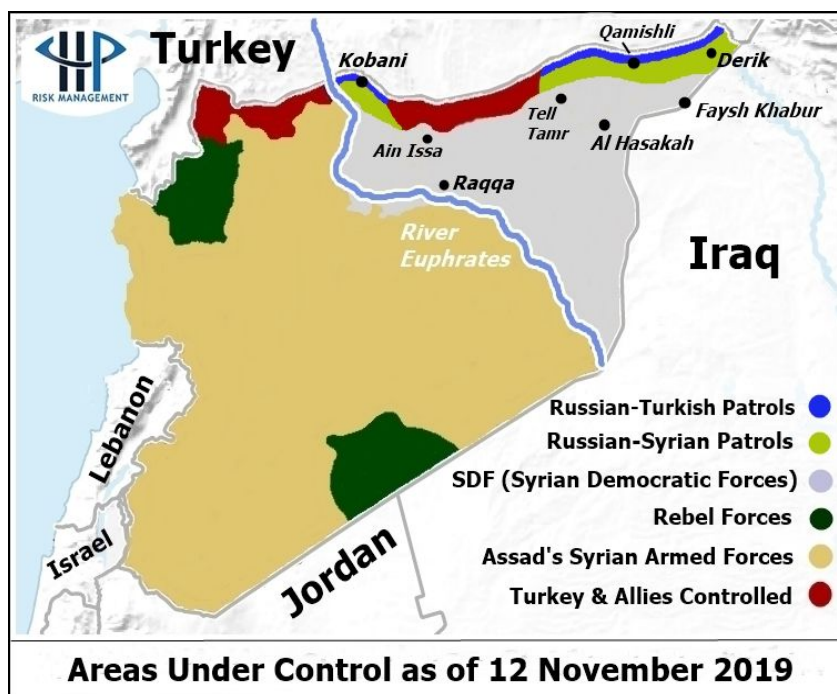
Situation Assessment

For some time prior to Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring", media workers operated with relative ease throughout much of Rojava. That has now changed with more uncertainty introduced to what has become a fluid and fast-evolving operating environment. The Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Force (SDF) has ceded territory to Syrian and Turkish military forces, in order to maintain some semblance of autonomy. This changing territorial control has been overseen by Moscow, which has established itself as a "mediator" in the absence of the US. Russian forces now patrol alongside the Turks and their militias on a corridor running along the Turkey/Syria border. Sections of Erdogan's 'buffer zone' have now been established by Turkish forces and allied militias such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya, reaching as far east of the Euphrates as the outskirts of Tell Tamr, and as far south as the M4 highway.

Forced into a pact with the government of Syria and the Russians, the SDF are hanging on to a reduced autonomous territory and trying to prevent what they see as a [potential genocide](#) at the hands of the Turks. The SDF and SAF (Syrian Armed Forces) currently control key strategic towns close to the M4 highway, such as Manbij, Ein Issa, Tabqa and Tell Tamr, as well as Qamishli, Derik and Al Hasakah.

American forces are now mostly confined to a number of [oil fields](#) in the east and the [Al Tanf base](#), though reports suggest they have recently returned to [Kobani](#) and around [Qamishli](#).

At least two journalists have been [killed](#) since the start of the offensive and several injured. Turkish air and drone strikes,



artillery and mortars are a serious concern in border areas, SDF positions throughout the buffer zone and on major supply routes.

Population [displacement](#) and the escape of [IS prisoners](#) has raised the prospect of more attacks in an area where [sleeper cells](#) have long been feared but incidents of attacks have been rare since IS was displaced. Three car bombs exploded on 11 November in [Qamishli](#) and in Deir es Zour province, IS has claimed the [murder of an Armenian priest and his father](#).

09 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operation 'Peace Spring' begins, with Turkish airstrikes on Qamishli, Tell Abyad, Ras al-Ayn and Ayn Issa. YPG retaliates by firing 6 rockets, 2 of which hit the Turkish town of Ceylanpinar.
10 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkish ground offensive begins with clashes near Tell Abyad & al-Bab.
11 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 journalists injured by SDF fire in Nusaybin, with civilian deaths in Suruc, Nusaybin and Tell Abyad. Suspected ISIS car bomb explodes in Qamishli 5 ISIS detainees escape Navkur prison near Qamishli after Turkish airstrike.
12 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkish & Syrian National Army (SNA) reach M4 highway, cutting the main road from Qamishli to Manbj. 9 civilians including politician Hevrin Khalaf reportedly executed south of Tal Abyad by Ahrar al-Sharqiya.
13 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 journalists killed and others injured in Turkish airstrike close to Ras al-Ain. SDF agree to allow Assad forces into Kobani & Manbj after US announces withdrawal from bases. SDF claim 785 ISIL-linked prisoners escaped near Ayn Issa.
14 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian & Syrian armed forces deploy close to the border. Syrian military take control of Tabqa dam.
15 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erdogan announces establishment of 'safe area' for Syrian refugees to return to.
16 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> US withdraw forces from Raqqah & Al Thawrah, and destroy their largest airbase near Kharab Ashk.
17 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alleged used of white phosphorus on civilians in Ras al-Ayn by Turkish military. 120 hour ceasefire announced by USA & Turkey to allow SDF to withdraw to 'safe zone'.
22 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia & Turkey announce 10-point Sochi Memorandum peace deal. Sporadic fighting continues.
26 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Videos published of Ankara-linked fighters torturing captives and mutilating dead bodies.
02 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Car bomb in border town of Tal Abyad kills 13.
03 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free Burma Rangers vehicle hit by Turkish mortar killing a medic.
11 November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simultaneous bombings in Qamishli kill at least 6 civilians. ISIS claim responsibility for killing 2 Armenian priests in Zar (east of Deir Ez Zor).

On The Ground

The situation is extremely fluid and clashes or air strikes can occur unexpectedly in areas near the Turkish/Syrian border. As such the below information is subject to change quickly and media teams should always seek to obtain up-to-date situational awareness prior to, and throughout a deployment.

- **Access**

The Semalka border post (close to Faysh Khabur) is the least risky option for entering Rojava from Iraq at present. The crossing is open and still [controlled](#) by Kurdish authorities, though one source stated that entry formalities are taking longer than before (up to four hours). This is in keeping with reports of additional scrutiny and checks upon entering urban areas. No one interviewed has reported any hostility from the authorities, including at checkpoints on the roads within SDF areas.

Paperwork requirements for media workers entering at Semalka remain the same, with advance applications for visas and accreditation going through the central SDF authorities and their media office at Faysh Khabur.

Other entry points are largely untested by journalists and are regarded as significantly more challenging.

- **Kurdish Controlled areas**

SDF controlled Rojava is now centred around the Qamishli - Al Hasakah - Derik triangle, an area currently considered to be relatively safe for the media to operate in. Traveling close to the border and in southern Hassakeh province are considered more dangerous. From Qamishli as far west as Amuda and south to the outskirts of Tell Tamr it is also currently permissible to operate. Tell Tamer has witnessed significant fighting.

Our sources indicate that little has changed in those areas still under the control or influence of the SDF despite initial fears that Assad forces may reappear in these areas and arrest foreigners. Speaking to both foreign and local journalists as well as security advisors operating in Rojava, the consensus is that as long as people continue to apply via official SDF channels and report from within SDF territory then media workers are relatively safe.

However, local journalists [remain concerned](#) the new situation could enable a return of the Government of Syria security services, which could prompt an exodus of journalists and regime critics.

It is worth remembering that Government of Syria army bases remain in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah. Journalists and tourists who have strayed into government checkpoints previously were arrested and moved to Damascus. In 2015 a [Swedish journalist](#) was arrested and in the summer of 2019 [an American](#) had a similar experience. Both were released after negotiations.

- **Detention Centres**

Visiting detention centres is still possible, but increasingly problematic. The SDF have stated they will no longer [prioritise](#) guarding such camps, which likely contributed to the recent chaos at [Al-Hawl](#). Journalists have told us of increased hostility, poor sanitation and real sense of desperation. Advance permits usually take two days to be issued.

- **Logistics**

Supplies of food, water and fuel appear to be stable for the moment in towns such as Al Hasakah, Derik and Qamishli. Initially many journalists stayed with their fixers in private houses, but hotels are available for the media in Qamishli and Derik. They have good electricity and adequate wifi. However, the car bombs in Qamishli on the 11th November exploded close to the Asia Hotel prompting some journalists to reconsider their accommodation options there.

Medical facilities are limited. Any serious medical emergency would involve self-drive across the border to Dohuk/Erbil, as medevac companies are unlikely to enter the region at present for security reasons.

- **Exit Strategy**

With Semalka offering the only viable exit from Rojava, there is a risk of the highway there being blocked and/or the border crossing being closed. Throughout this recent period, rumours about SAF forces moving to take control of the Semalka border crossing have been rife amongst the media. This has prompted several media to pull out fearing their exit would be compromised. At times, judgements are very hard to make clouded by the uncertainty of seismic strategic shifts in power. However, local sourced intelligence from trusted individuals has proved more reliable than the “grapevine” which has at times been alarmist.

Outlook

Developments on the ground will be largely shaped by the success of political negotiations between dominant parties in the region and their military ambitions. Turkish probing of SDF defence lines and the movement of redeployments around Rojava will continue to cause panic and uncertainty and see pockets of conflict emerge. Unrest will also continue among the Kurdish population, as recently witnessed in [Kobani](#) in opposition to the Russian-Turkish joint patrols

Regular [clashes](#) between opposing sides in the vicinity of Tell Tamer and Kobani will persist and could quickly escalate. Joint Russian and Turkish patrols have also [been observed](#) in the vicinity of Derik and have encountered civilian resistance.

Longer term, if President Assad feels bolstered by the Syrian army's return to Rojava, it is possible that Damascus will seek to gradually erode SDF control of the region. This ambition will be shaped in part by Turkish activity and the stance of Tehran and Moscow, but will likely be controlled for now with Damascus still incapable of controlling the entire country and likely to prioritise ending the resistance in Idlib. Any extension of Syrian control in Rojava would, however, make the situation for media workers more difficult.

The threat of IS returning in some capacity cannot be ruled out, especially with SDF forces being stretched on the ground. The Turkish authorities have [forcibly repatriated](#) Syrian refugees in recent weeks, which could provide a fertile recruiting ground for jihadi groups. Any uptick in local IS activity will further destabilise the region and present a revived threat to civilian life.

Additionally, reporting from the Syrian side of the conflict may cause problems for journalists when visiting Turkey in the future. The Turkish authorities have recently [clamped down](#) on journalists and social media users who have been critical of the government, as well as singling out [specific publications](#).

Safety Advice

- Only work with trusted and reliable fixers, and ensure to check their references. Journalists have told us that some fixers sometimes simply give the 'right answer' in order to help get a story rather than relaying the reality.
- Do not try and bypass the SDF authorities, and always apply for all necessary paperwork in good time.
- Before traveling to any location check on the latest security situation with locals and other journalists who have been there. If possible ask for updates at checkpoints along the way. Be aware of an 'echo chamber' effect that individuals spreading unsubstantiated information can create.
- Be aware if operating near or even when approaching frontline areas, air and drone strikes, artillery and mortar strikes are a real threat.
- Live broadcasting and filming from rooftops is highly dangerous, so should be avoided.
- If possible, avoid staying and eating in obvious establishments which can be a target. Plan your overnight stops in advance, and only stay in areas considered to be relatively safe that are well away from any frontline fighting. Always aim to get back to your accommodation well before dark.
- If appropriate for the assignment, consider using a less conspicuous vehicle like a standard saloon car.
- Always use discretion when filming, especially around sensitive sites and state infrastructure.
- If working with a security advisor, as a minimum ensure that they have up-to-date medical qualifications as medical facilities are limited. Many news crews are opting to work with security advisors.
- Bring a well-stocked emergency first aid kit with you; and identify all available SDF and civilian medical facilities in case of injury. Medevac options in Rojava will be severely limited if not impossible. The US will likely continue to maintain a presence in Rojava, however it is not clear if they will assist journalists in distress unless the journalists are embedded with them.
- Appropriate PPE should be taken and kept to hand at all times.
- You should bring emergency provisions with you in case you are cut off or there are any issues with food supplies.
- Consider your digital security in advance of travel and whilst in the region. Only communicate via devices and platforms you know are secure and that won't compromise the safety of you and your team.
- Landmines and improvised explosive devices were [used by IS](#) in the past, so factor this into consideration if operating in previously held IS territory. Ensure you have adequate travel and life insurance in place. For EU based freelancers, [Voyager High Risk Insurance](#) is a popular option.

In addition to the above, a general safety guide to reporting from conflict zones can be found via the [CPJ's website](#).



HP Risk Management works with a number of newsrooms and journalist associations, providing on-call risk assessment support, safety advice and training. We continuously support journalists working in Syria and other high risk locations. For more information please contact info@hpriskmanagement.com

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