

## New Gallup International Survey in Syria

**Syrians across Raqqa and Hasakah show widespread support for Turkish intervention but if Assad gains ground the majority would prefer a return to Daesh rule.**

Three weeks ago President Trump announced the withdrawal of US troops from North East Syria who had been supporting the primarily Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against Daesh. At the same time, Turkey's President Recep Erdogan announced a military intervention designed to create a 'safe zone' and push Kurdish forces out of the area.

Western media largely chastised President Trump for abandoning the Kurds while also criticising President Erdogan for bombing those who have just rid themselves of Daesh.

But what do those on the ground think about the intervention? And what are their hopes and aspirations for the future? Gallup International Research Institutes (London and Damascus) have been tracking public opinion since the Syrian military conflict started in 2012 and over the last ten days has polled (face-to-face) a representative sample of 600 adults across Raqqa and Hasakah, the two regions in which the Turkish intervention is focussed. While unable to access those towns and villages currently under attack from the Turkish intervention, we have also included 100 Kurds who fled these villages within the last week.

The findings reveal that three in five **(58%) support President Trump's decision** to withdraw troops from their areas, but among the Kurds opinion is unsurprisingly very different (33% support, 67% oppose). But what may come as a surprise to many is that the same proportion **(57%) support Turkish military intervention**. However, note here that while the Arab population widely support this (64%), the Kurds are understandably less enthusiastic (77% oppose it, but surprisingly 23% support it).

Based on our findings of previous polls and ongoing qualitative research we suggest there are **three possible reasons for a split in the Kurdish opinion on Turkish intervention**.

Firstly, there is a deep intra-Kurdish divide. Many Kurds in Syria are ideologically at odds with the PYD - a left-wing affiliate of the PKK with non-Syrian leadership. Many of these people are currently displaced and await the successful conclusion of the Turkish operation so they can return home.

A number of young Kurds fled to Turkey and the 'Olive branch' zones to avoid PYD conscription. Turkish intervention designed to defeat the PYD/SDF is in their interest, yet

these people also do not welcome the Assad regime taking control of their territories because they will also force people to fight with them. Turkish control is the safest means of avoiding personal engagement in violence.

But more fundamentally many Kurds who joined the beginning of the Syrian revolution view the PYD as collaborators with Assad and a group that has previously handed over many activists to the regime. Turkey is now considered to be less close to the Assad regime than the PYD.

For many years now, public opinion has consistently shown that Turkey is considered the only country that has a positive influence on affairs inside Syria. And many in Raqqa and Hasakah speak about wanting to live under Turkish control, envious of their relative prosperity no doubt, a strong nation that can stand up to Assad. Our survey shows 55% of those across the two governorates believe Turkey is having a positive influence in the region which compares favourably to the International Coalition against ISIS (24%), Russia (14%), the US (10%) and Iran (6%).

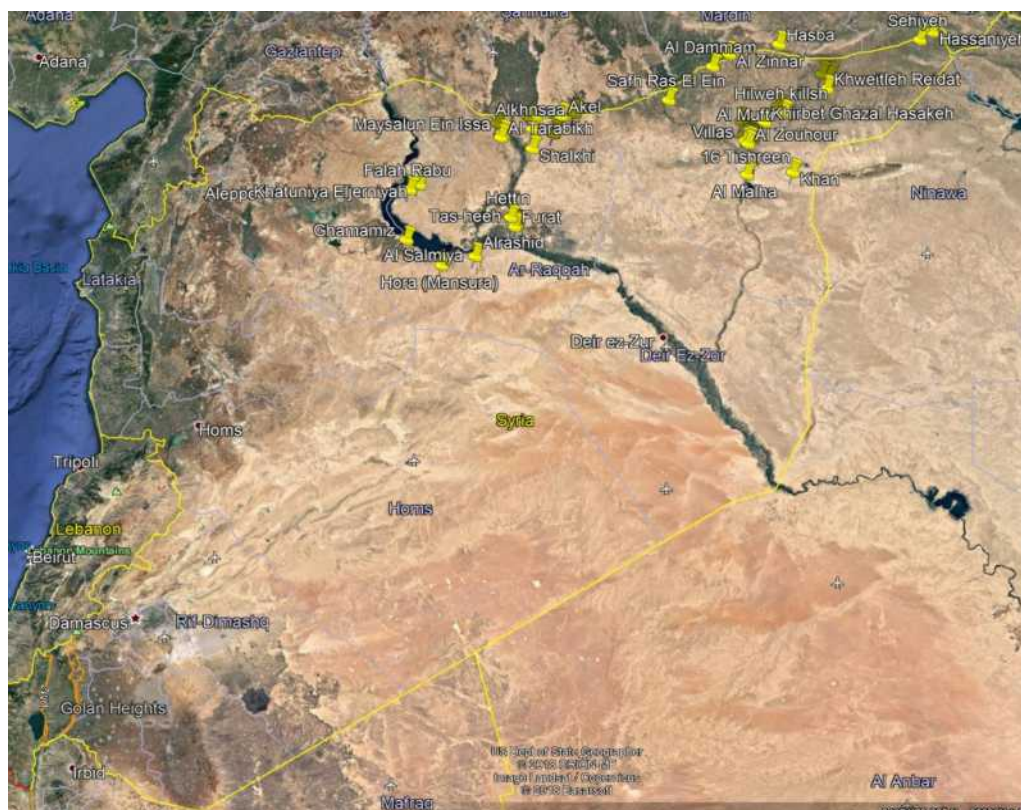
The survey results also highlight a **potentially disturbing consequence** of the intervention. Almost three in four (69%) agree that “if Assad gains more territory in the region then I support the use of violence to defend our rights”. With the SDF now aligning themselves with President Assad (an agreement which only 23% support) it seems inevitable that the regime will control more of north east Syria. Indeed 79% of survey respondents agree that “the withdrawal of US troops from Syria will increase the likelihood that Assad will gain more territory”. Almost three in four (70%) also agree that “if the Assad regime gains more territory Syria will effectively be controlled by Iran”.

But of more concern to seasoned observers will be the 57% of the population who agree that **“living under Daesh would be preferable to living under the control of Assad”**. Gallup International recently interviewed women who fled al-Hawl camp and most shared similar views. It is Assad gaining ground more than the withdrawal of US troops itself that increases the chance of Daesh (or something similar) returning.

Many in the West argue that Daesh has been defeated – militarily for sure, but ideologically there seems there is more to do. With 62% in the survey saying it is ‘very/somewhat likely’ that Daesh will increase their control again in the coming months, we would be naïve to suggest Syria has rid themselves of Daesh.

Notes:-

Gallup International interviewed face-to-face a representative sample of 601 adults aged 18+ across the northern governorates of Raqqqa and Hasakah. The distribution of the sampling points is shown below. Fieldwork took place 13<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> October 2019.



The statistical margin of error at the 95% confidence level is  $\pm 4\%$

The data has been weighted to be representative of the Arab/Kurd population split across the two regions.

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