

# Tensions spike as Turkish convoy enters northwest Syria



A convoy of Turkish military vehicles is pictured near the town of Maar Hitat in northern Syria's Idlib province

## ● The Syrian government reacted angrily after the convoy entered Idlib province

Maaret al-Noman, Syria

A Turkish military convoy crossed into jihadist-run northwest Syria Monday, sending tensions soaring between Damascus and rebel-backer Ankara which said its forces were targeted with an air strike.

The Syrian government reacted angrily after the convoy entered Idlib province and headed towards a key town where regime forces are waging fierce battles with jihadists and rebels.

After eight years of civil war, the jihadist-run Idlib region on the border with Turkey is the last major stronghold of opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

The region of some three million people was supposed to be protected by a Turkish-Russian

buffer zone deal signed last year, but instead regime and Russian forces have upped their deadly bombardment of the bastion since late April.

Following days of inching forward on the ground, Russian-backed regime forces on Sunday took control of the edges of the town of Khan Sheikhun in the south of the stronghold.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, reported Syrian and Russian air strikes aimed at hindering the convoy's advance through Idlib province.

Turkey's defence ministry "strongly" condemned the attack, which it said had killed three civilians and wounded 12.

"Despite repeated warnings we made to the authorities of the Russian Federation, the military operations by the regime forces continue in Idlib region in violation of the existing memorandums and agreements with the Russian Federation," it said in a statement.

The Damascus regime meanwhile denounced the convoy's crossing over from Turkey.

"Turkish vehicles loaded with munitions... are heading towards Khan Sheikhun to help the terrorists," a foreign ministry source said, using the regime's blanket term for Turkish-backed rebels and jihadists.

This confirmed "the support provided by the Turkish regime to terrorist groups," state news agency SANA reported the source as saying.

### Rebel killed

Yesterday afternoon, a correspondent saw the convoy stop on the Aleppo-Damascus highway in the village of Maar Hatat, just north of Khan Sheikhun.

Warplanes and helicopter machine guns targeted nearby areas, he said.

Earlier, a Russian air strike hit the rebel vehicle leading the convoy just outside Maaret

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al-Noman, 15 kilometres (nine miles) north of Khan Sheikhun, killing a Turkish-backed fighter from the Faylaq al-Sham group, the Britain-based Observatory said.

After the convoy made it inside the town, Russian and Syrian warplanes targeted its outskirts in an apparent "attempt to prevent the convoy from advancing", Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

On Sunday, pro-regime forces backed by Russian air strikes took control of Khan Sheikhun's northwestern outskirts.

Fighting continues to the east and west of the town, the Observatory says.

Any seizure of Khan Sheikhun and territory further east would encircle a patch of countryside to its south, including the town of Morek that is home to a key Turkish observation post.

It would also see the regime secure a position on a key highway connecting government-held Damascus with the northern city of Aleppo, which the regime retook from rebels in December 2016.

## Russia probes 'foreign meddling' after protests

Moscow, Russia

Russia's parliament yesterday agreed to probe "foreign meddling" in the country's affairs, following a wave of protests that Moscow has accused Western governments and media of backing.

A committee will investigate reports by foreign media as

well as "embassies which distributed information" about the demonstrations, lower house speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said.

Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets of Moscow in recent weeks to protest the authorities' decision to block prominent opposition figures from standing in local elections.

## Palestinian president fires advisers as financial crisis hits

● Tax transfers, which account for some 65 percent of PA revenues

● Abbas has accused Israel of blackmail and refused to take any of the tax transfers

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories



Mahmud Abbas

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has fired all of his advisers, his office said yesterday, amid a financial crisis in the occupied West Bank that has prompted deep salary cuts.

Abbas's office did not provide further details on the number of advisers or the costs involved, pointing only to a brief statement issued through official Palestinian news agency Wafa.

The move comes amid a spending crunch following Israel's decision in February to withhold around \$10 million a month in tax transfers.

Israel collects some \$190 million a month in customs duties levied on goods destined for Palestinian markets that transit through its ports.

It then transfers the money to the Palestinian government. The amount it deducted -- \$138 million for the year -- corresponds to what Israel says the Palestinian Authority paid prisoners in Israeli jails, or their families, in 2018.

Prisoners who have carried out attacks on Israelis are among those receiving the payments, and Israel says that encourages further violence.

Abbas has accused Israel of blackmail and refused to take any of the tax transfers, which account for some 65 percent of PA revenues.

The PA has cut salaries for most its tens of thousands of employees by half to keep the government afloat.

On top of the tax dispute, the United States has also cut hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Palestinians via various programmes.

Jihad Harb, a Palestinian political analyst, said it appeared Abbas had decided to sack his advisers after receiving a report in June on payments to ministers and officials.

"It is clear that president Abbas received the report from the committee that examined the salaries and benefits of employees," Harb said.

He "wants to reduce his office's spending by taking austerity measures to confront the current budget crisis."

# Controversial study links fluoride in water to lower IQ

## ● Fluoridated water is supplied to around two-thirds of US residents

Washington, United States

A study published yesterday links exposure to fluoridated tap water during pregnancy to lower IQ scores in infants, but several outside experts expressed concern over its methodology and questioned its findings.

Fluoride has been added to community water supplies in industrial countries to prevent tooth decay since the 1950s.

Very high levels of the mineral have been found to be toxic to the brain, though the concentrations seen in fluoridated tap water are generally deemed safe.

"We realized that there were major questions about the safety



Representative picture (Courtesy of Askthedentist)

of fluoride, especially for pregnant women and young children," Christine Till at Canada's York University, senior author of the paper published in JAMA Pediatrics, said.

"We know that decisions need to be based on evidence, and we had no evidence on whether fluoride in pregnancy was safe, and regardless of the outcome, that knowledge was really critical."



**Fluoride is an ionic compound derived from fluorine, which is the single most reactive element; it is naturally found in many rocks. About 95 percent of the fluoride added to public water supplies is produced from phosphorite rock**

The study looked at 601 mother-child pairs across six Canadian cities, with 41 per cent living in communities supplied with fluoridated municipal water.

The researchers said fluoridated water is supplied to around two-thirds of US residents, just over a third of Canadian residents and three percent in Europe.

After controlling for other toxins in their analysis, they found an increase in concentration of fluoride in pregnant mother's urine of one milligram a liter was associated with a 4.5-point lower IQ score in boys -- but not girls -- at age three or four.

When estimating the daily maternal fluoride intake instead of fluoride in urine, they found a one milligram increase in intake was associated with a deficit of 3.7 IQ points for both boys and girls.

Anticipating controversy, JAMA Pediatrics took the un-

usual step of issuing an Editor's Note that said the decision to publish the article was "not easy."

"Given the nature of the findings and their potential implications, we subjected it to additional scrutiny for its methods and the presentation of its findings."

But experts in fields ranging from statistics to toxicology to neuroscience expressed serious reservations.

"The key words in the paper are 'higher levels,'" said Oliver Jones, Associate Professor of Analytical Chemistry, RMIT University.

"The authors state that an increase of one milligram per liter (1 mg/L) increase in fluoride was associated with a 4.49 point lower IQ score but fluoride intake appears to have been below 1 mg/L for most people in the study, even for those with fluoridated water."