

Syria Situation Report: March 22 - April 19, 2021

1 Mar. 27-Apr. 12: The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) escalate operations to secure prisons and camps in northeastern Syria and preempt an ISIS break-out attempt during Ramadan, April 12-May 12. The SDF conducted the “Humanitarian and Security Operation” in the al Hawl displaced persons camp from March 27-April 12, arresting at least 150 ISIS affiliates and raiding several ISIS cells responsible for the string of assassinations in the camp in early 2021. The SDF also transferred tens of detainees out of the overcrowded Ghwayran detention center in Hasakah City to smaller detention centers in Shaddadi and at the al Omar gas field, Deir ez-Zour Province, throughout March and early April. ISIS reportedly broke 11 detainees out of the SDF-affiliated prison in al Suwar, Deir ez-Zour Province, on March 22. ISIS also tried and failed to break detainees out of the Kabiba detention center in Deir ez-Zour Province on April 6 and April 12. SDF security operations will likely preempt successful ISIS break-outs during the Ramadan attack campaign. However, the SDF lacks a long-term plan to deradicalize and reintegrate residents of the camps and detention centers, which will likely continue to strain the SDF’s thinly-stretched security apparatus.

2 Mar. 28- Apr. 19: Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) initiates arrest campaign targeting high-ranking members of ISIS, Hurras al-Din, and smaller al-Qaeda linked groups to legitimize itself as the sole capable governing actor in Idlib. The arrests targeted high-ranking personnel, including the leader of the Libyan ISIS affiliate Katibat Al-Bittar Al-Libi, who was arrested in Kafr Dariyan, Idlib Province. Raided ISIS cells responded to the arrests with gunfire and suicide vest detonations, but may have lost significant organizational capacity to the raids. HTS likely aims to decapitate organizations with which it competes for control of Idlib and may also aim to demonstrate its dedication to eradicating other, “hardline” salafi-jihadist organizations in order to gain international recognition.

3 Apr. 1-14: Opposition media sources reports that ISIS attacked regime checkpoints near the Hamar and Ward oil fields in Deir ez-Zour Province, the Zamla, Sha’er, Arak, and Jazal oil fields in Homs Province, and the Tabqa oil field in Raqqa Province. ISIS did not claim any of the attacks, but ISIS regularly stages attacks in the Central Syrian Desert without claiming responsibility for them. ISIS did not seize any of the oil fields, but attacks at the Ward oil field on April 2 and that Arak oil field on April 9 caused at least 10 casualties each. The Russian Air Force sustained an air campaign targeting ISIS hide-outs in Jabal Bishri and near Rahjan, Hama Province, throughout early April, likely to suppress ISIS’s ability to surge such attacks. In the most dangerous scenario, ISIS may aim to seize one or more oil fields during its ongoing Ramadan campaign. ISIS could use these fields to increase its oil-smuggling revenue stream in the Central Syrian Desert or, in a more likely scenario, simply reduce the revenue the regime can derive from these natural resources by destroying oil extraction infrastructure at the targeted fields.

4 Apr. 4: The British Royal Air Force (RAF) conducts at least four strikes on ISIS cells in Syria. The US-led coalition infrequently uses airstrikes to target ISIS cells in SDF-held northeastern Syria, where ISIS is often closely integrated with the local population. At least one of the RAF strikes targeted cells 50 km west of Hasakah City, likely in the Abdul Aziz or Bayda mountains, Hasakah Province. The British strikes may have targeted a high-value ISIS leader, including ISIS caliph Abdullah al Mawla, although no sources have reported the death of such a leader in northeast Syria. Iraq’s al Mada Paper and the US-based Newlines Magazine reported in mid-April that al Mawla is hiding in northeast Syria, per unidentified Iraqi security sources. If high-value ISIS leadership is sheltering in northeast Syria, rather than in zones of ISIS control in the regime-held Central Syrian Desert, SDF governance may be far less effective than previously assessed.

5 Apr. 8: Russian Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev has unscheduled meeting with Bashar Al-Assad and several members of Assad’s inner circle in Damascus. Syrian Head of the National Security Bureau Ali Mamlouk, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Sousan, and special advisers to Assad Buthaina Shaaban and Luna Al-Shibl reportedly attended the meeting. The purpose of the meeting and matters discussed remain unknown. Lavrentiev last visited Syria on January 29, 2021, to discuss the progress of Syria’s UN-backed Constitutional Committee process. Lavrentiev may have used his April meeting to further plans for Syria’s scheduled elections, which will likely cement Assad’s hold on power.

6 Apr. 11: Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 5th Corps establishes new military base and helipad in Ma’adan. The SAA 5th Corps previously constructed a helipad near Ma’adan, Deir ez-Zour Province, in August 2020. Russian officers, members of the SAA 5th Corps, and local officials met on April 10 to discuss the potential of establishing another military base in Tibni, about 15 miles southeast of Ma’adan, to expand Russian-backed National Defense Force control in northwest Deir Ez-Zour. Russian-backed units will likely use their base at Ma’adan to expand the range of their rotary-wing aircraft during counter-ISIS operations in the Central Syrian Desert, where they are keen to limit ISIS attacks on key infrastructure and sideline Iranian involvement.

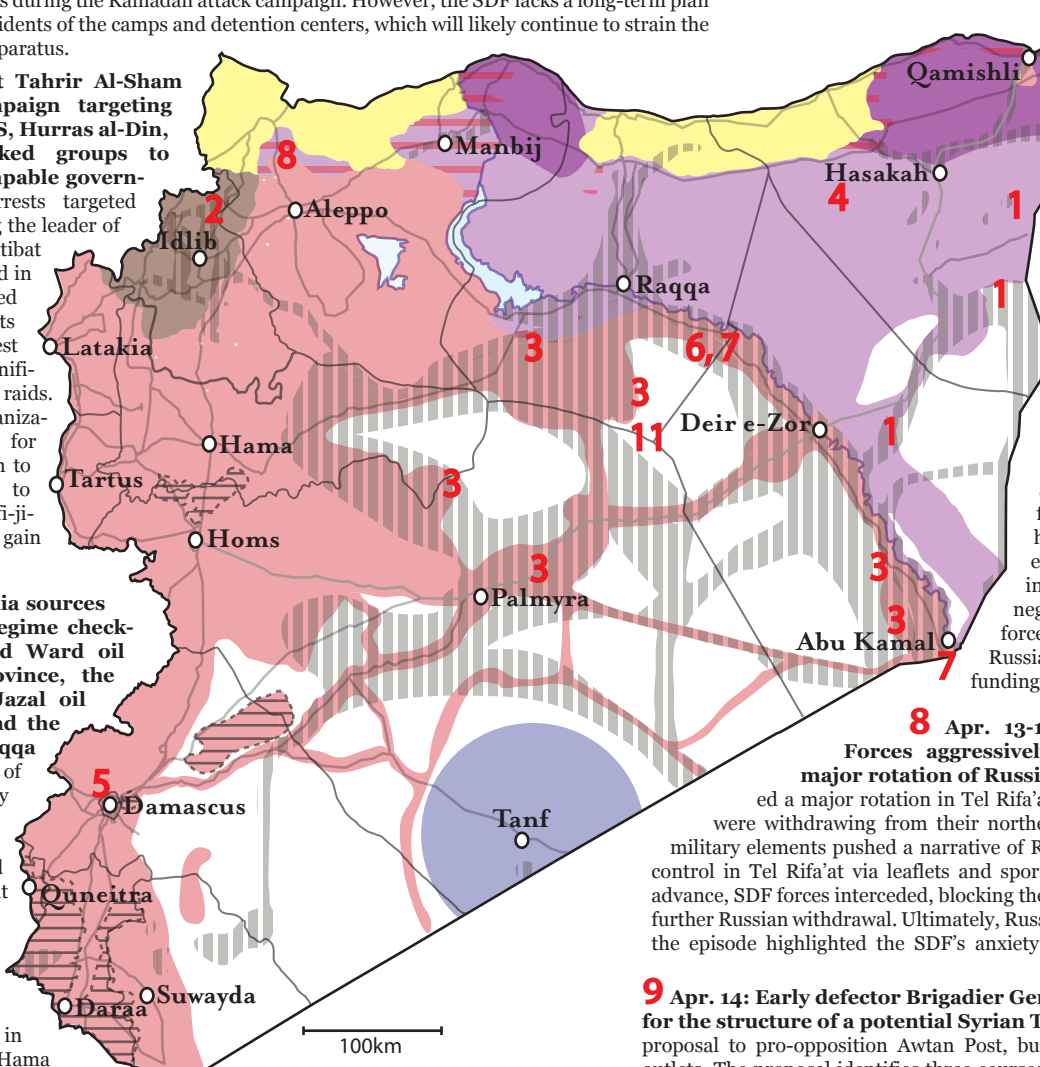
7 Apr. 12-20: Iranian operations suffer several setbacks in eastern Syria due to salary shortages, ISIS attacks, and Israeli airstrikes. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has struggled in recent weeks to provide prompt payment to its militia forces, resulting in a rash of militia personnel resignations. Approximately 250 militiamen, predominately foreign fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, resigned on April 11, citing delayed payments and failure to increase salaries in correspondence with the dropping value of the Syrian pound. Iranian-backed leadership expelled an additional 45 militia personnel from Iranian basing in Ma’adan on April 18 after the foreign fighters refused to carry out clearing operations due to a perceived threat of successful ISIS counterattacks. Israeli airstrikes have compounded pressure on the militias, forcing Iranian-backed leadership to seize civilian homes in Abu Kamal to house personnel and equipment. Iran may be forced to downsize its militias in response to external pressures unless it is able to negotiate joint basing arrangements with Russian-backed forces to secure protection from IAF strikes under the Russian air defense artillery umbrella or allocates additional funding to properly pay its militiamen to its already-costly Syrian intervention.

8 Apr. 13-14: Turkish military and Syrian Democratic Forces aggressively respond to confusion over unannounced, major rotation of Russian forces near Tel Rifa’at. Russian forces conducted a major rotation in Tel Rifa’at, sparking local media speculation that the Russians were withdrawing from their northernmost positions. Exploiting the confusion, Turkish military elements pushed a narrative of Russian abandonment of its positions along the line of control in Tel Rifa’at via leaflets and sporadic shelling of the area. Fearing a possible Turkish advance, SDF forces interceded, blocking the road between Tel Rifa’at and Aleppo City to prevent a further Russian withdrawal. Ultimately, Russian forces maintained their positions in Tel Rifa’at, but the episode highlighted the SDF’s anxiety about a possible withdrawal of Russian forces and Turkey’s eagerness to exploit any such shift.

9 Apr. 14: Early defector Brigadier General Ahmed Rahal presents three possibilities for the structure of a potential Syrian Transitional Military Council. Rahal presented the proposal to pro-opposition Awatan Post, but it has not received endorsement from pro-regime outlets. The proposal identifies three courses of action: (1) separate military and political councils with Assad regime and opposition group membership; (2) a sole military council with membership from the Assad regime and opposition groups; or (3) a military council broken into three parts of regime personnel, opposition groups, and independent officers. This proposal stands in stark contrast to the 2012 proposals, modeled on the Lebanese Taif Agreement, that would have used ethnicity as the transition council’s core membership criteria.

10 Apr. 17: Iran, Russia, and Syrian regime officials establish an operations room with the aim of supplying Syria with a steady flow of oil and wheat, circumventing Western sanctions. The operations room will coordinate joint naval operations with civilian vessels to protect them from visit, board, search, and seizure operations by Western navies seeking to enforce sanctions. Iranian vessels seeking to avoid Western sanctions docked in Tartus on April 11th, delivering much-needed oil supplies. Russia and Iran aim bolster Assad’s legitimacy and the stability of regime-held Syria by providing essential services and the hard currency needed to stabilize the Syrian pound.

11 Apr. 17-19: Russian-backed forces launch coordinated ground and air assault on ISIS hideouts in Jabal Bishri. Admiral Alexander Karpov, leader of the Russian Reconciliation Center in Syria, claimed that the Russian Air Force killed 200 ISIS militants and destroyed 24 trucks and a IED production facility between April 17 and 18. Although the Russian kill count is very likely exaggerated, the uptick in ground operations and airstrikes marks an increase likely intended to stem ISIS’s Ramadan campaign in the Central Syrian Desert. ISIS claimed to have killed two Russian paratroopers as they exited their helicopter during clearing operation in Jabal al Bishri on April 17. Russian sources have not confirmed that the operation resulted in any Russian deaths; the operation may have instead been led by Syrian units, likely the elite 25th Division “Tiger Forces,” and ISIS media may have claimed to have killed Russians for propaganda purposes. If ISIS’s claim is true, however, counter-ISIS operations led by a Russian special forces air assault would mark a significant increase in Russia’s willingness to place their forces at risk in the counter-ISIS fight in Syria, in contrast with Russia’s relatively risk-intolerant counter-ISIS operations over the past two years.



Pro-Regime	Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)	Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain	Israeli Strike
ISIS Support Zones	SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence	U.S. and Partner Forces	US Strike
HTS-Dominated, Turkish Presence	Turkey-Opposition	Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)	

Key Takeaway: ISIS faces pressure along multiple fronts as it begins its annual Ramadan surge of attacks in Syria. Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay’at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) mounted counter-ISIS operations targeting leadership cells in Idlib, likely in order to both depress ISIS’s attack capability and performance distance HTS from other “hardline” salafi-jihadi organizations. The British Royal Air Force and the Russian military similarly conducted precision operations, possibly intended to target high-value ISIS leadership, in eastern Syria. The US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), meanwhile, secured camps and detention centers housing former ISIS affiliates in order to prevent ISIS from staging a prison break during the coming month. ISIS’s Ramadan campaign will likely continue to feature large-scale but disparate attacks on oil and gas facilities in the Central Syrian Desert and attacks targeting civil society leaders, exploiting existing Arab-Kurdish divisions, in SDF-held northeast Syria.



Contributors: Eva Kahan and Jonathan Tishman
©2021 by the Institute for the Study of War
Control of Terrain Accurate as of April 19, 2021