

Syria Situation Report: January 8 - 29, 2021

1 Jan. 8 – 18: Iranian-backed militias in Deir ez-Zour Province adapt to avoid being targeted, following uptick in Israeli airstrikes in late December and early January. The IRGC-Quds Force and Iranian proxies repositioned assets within Al-Mayadeen, Deir ez-Zour Province, from January 8 through January 11, redeploying heavy weapons away from the neighborhood with the highest concentration of Iranian assets and personnel. Iranian-backed forces are separating hard targets like heavy weapons from major force concentrations likely in hopes of minimizing casualties, under the assumption Israeli strikes will focus on the former. Iran-aligned militias in Abu Kamal, Al-Mayadeen, and Deir ez-Zour City, Deir ez-Zour Province, lowered their visible flags and replaced them with Syrian flags – a move likely intended to mask Iranian proxy positions and deter future Israeli strikes. Dozens of Iranian militia fighters defected to the Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps in Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, on January 18, citing Israeli airstrikes.

2 Jan. 8 – 13: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham initiates operation against opposing factions amid deteriorating security situation in Idlib Province. Unknown attackers assaulted an HTS checkpoint near Al-Mastouma, Idlib Province, killing two HTS fighters, on January 8. The assault is the latest in a string of attempted and successful attacks by unknown actors seemingly targeting HTS that began in December 2020. HTS militants raided a house reportedly inhabited by an ISIS cell in Kafr Takhareem, Idlib Province, on January 12. Two presumed-ISIS members detonated suicide vests while two others surrendered to HTS; one HTS fighter was killed and several others were wounded in the explosion. HTS militants raided a house they claimed was inhabited by former members of the Hazm Movement in Trmanin, Idlib Province, arresting three. The Hazm Movement is now defunct; the Free Syrian Army affiliate was overrun by Jahbat al-Nusra (HTS's predecessor) in 2014. Likelihood of Russo-Turkish escalation.

3 Jan. 8: Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah lead effort to reconcile the Assad regime and Hamas. The two parties have had a fractious relationship since Hamas publicly supported anti-regime protesters in 2011. Back-channel negotiations are ongoing and both parties have issued statements that indicate some rapprochement.

4 Jan. 9: Ahrar al-Sham appoints Amer Al-Sheikh Abu Obaydah Qatna as its new leader after schism within group in November 2020. Ahrar al-Sham was previously led by Jaber Ali Pasha, and a breakaway faction in November announced Hassan Soufan as its leader. Abu Obaydah, previously Emir of Ahrar al-Sham operations within the Jandires sector, was appointed with the approval of both Pasha and Soufan to end infighting.

5 Jan. 11: Israeli airstrikes hit multiple Iran-linked targets near Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, in deadliest Israeli strike in Syria in years. The strikes hit 16 structures, including manned positions and weapons warehouses, killing at least 57 Iran-aligned fighters and injuring dozens more. The United States reportedly provided intelligence assistance to Israel in connection with the strike.

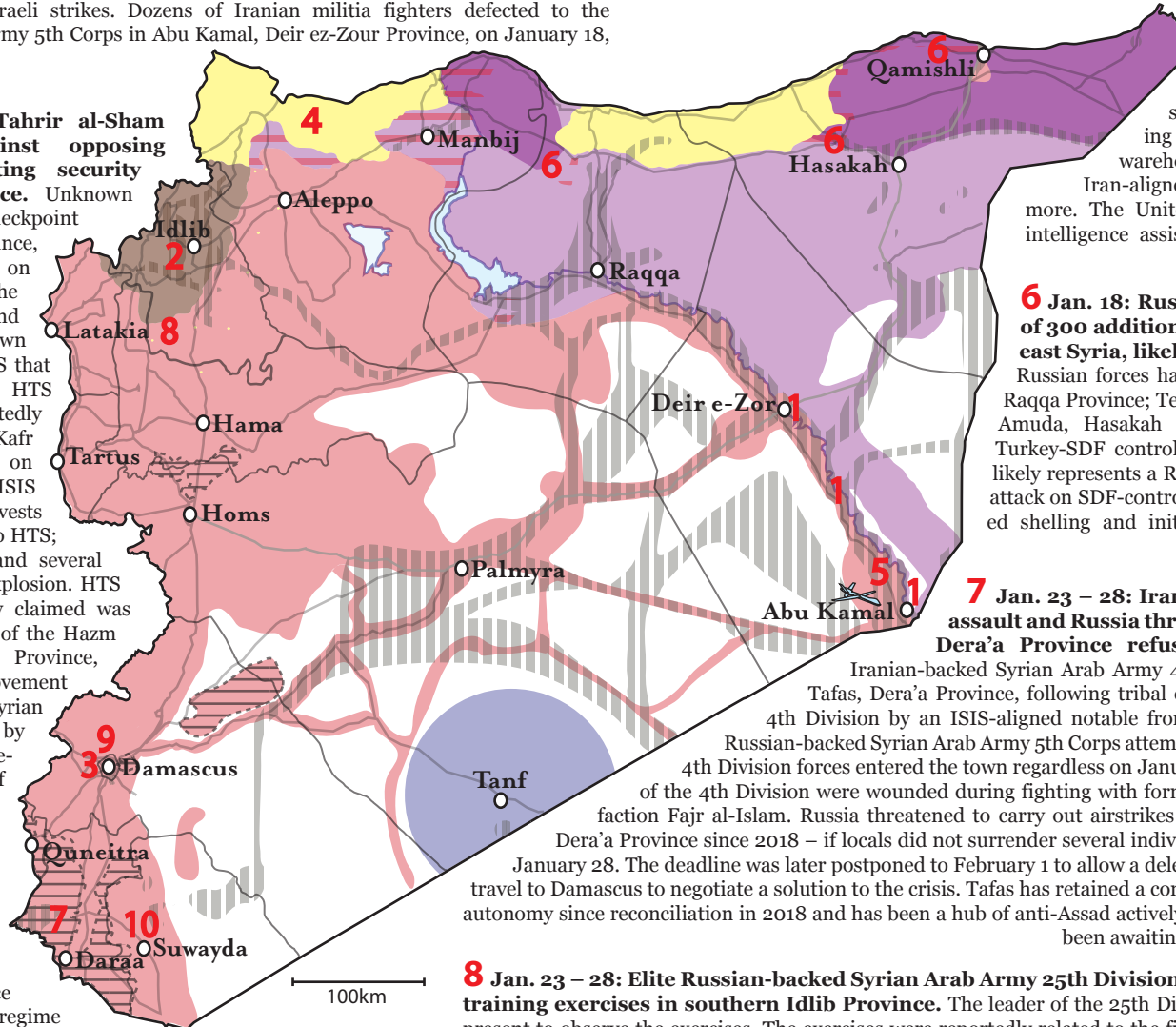
6 Jan. 18: Russia announces deployment of 300 additional Military Police to northeast Syria, likely to deter a Turkish attack. Russian forces have already arrived in Ain Issa, Raqqa Province; Tel Tamr, Hasakah Province; and Amuda, Hasakah Province – towns along the Turkey-SDF control boundaries. This deployment likely represents a Russian effort to deter a Turkish attack on SDF-controlled areas after Turkey escalated shelling and initiated frontline skirmishes on these towns in November.

7 Jan. 23 – 28: Iranian-backed forces prepare assault and Russia threatens airstrikes as town in Dera'a Province refuses regime demands. The Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army 4th Division prepared to storm Tafas, Dera'a Province, following tribal clashes and threats against the 4th Division by an ISIS-aligned notable from Tafas in early January. The Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps attempted to negotiate a solution, but 4th Division forces entered the town regardless on January 24, 2021. Several members of the 4th Division were wounded during fighting with former members of the opposition faction Fajr al-Islam. Russia threatened to carry out airstrikes against the town – its first in Dera'a Province since 2018 – if locals did not surrender several individuals wanted by the regime by January 28. The deadline was later postponed to February 1 to allow a delegation from Dera'a Province to travel to Damascus to negotiate a solution to the crisis. Tafas has retained a comparatively high degree of local autonomy since reconciliation in 2018 and has been a hub of anti-Assad activity; pro-regime forces have likely been awaiting a pretense to attack the town.

8 Jan. 23 – 28: Elite Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army 25th Division (the Tiger Forces) conduct training exercises in southern Idlib Province. The leader of the 25th Division, Suheil Hassan, was also present to observe the exercises. The exercises were reportedly related to the filming of a Russian movie. This claim may be disinformation intended to mask a military buildup, however.

9 Jan. 25 – 29: Syrian Constitutional Committee meets for the fifth time in Geneva, Switzerland, ahead of upcoming Syrian presidential elections. Geir Peterson, the UN Syria Envoy, encouraged the Committee to draft a new Syrian Constitution ahead of the election scheduled to take place between April 16 and May 16, 90 days before Assad's seven-year term expires. The Constitutional Committee, which has been co-opted by Assad regime loyalists in the past several years, is unlikely to produce any meaningful proposals.

10 Jan. 28: Druze population initiates anti-Assad protests in Suwayda City, Suwayda Province. Protests were triggered by regime-aligned Brigadier General Luay al-Ali publicly insulting Druze spiritual leader Hikmat al-Hijri. Druze from Damascus and Quneitra Provinces also participated in protests. These protests mark a significant shift in the alignment of Druze populations, which have historically remained neutral in the Syrian Civil War, but began increasingly engaging in anti-regime activity in mid-2020.



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

*AL QAEDA-LINKED GROUPS CONTROL NEARLY ALL GOVERNANCE AND MILITARY STRUCTURES IN GREATER IDLIB PROVINCE. VARIOUS LOCAL ACTORS ASSERT LIMITED CONTROL OVER ISOLATED AREAS OF GREATER IDLIB.

Control of Terrain Accurate as of January 29, 2021

Key Takeaway: Fighting between pro-Assad regime forces and local opposition elements in Dera'a Province is at its most intense since Russia brokered reconciliation agreements between the two factions in 2018. Iranian-backed regime units have surrounded the town of Tafas after suffering several casualties while trying to storm the town. Russia-backed forces have pursued their standard approach, pushing for a negotiated solution while other factions in the pro-regime bloc prepare to use force. There has been an inflection in Russian behavior, however; Russia did not intervene to stop the first assault on the town by Iranian-backed forces and threatened to itself carry out airstrikes if locals refused to turn over individuals wanted by the regime. This may represent a Russian belief that Tafas, a hub of anti-Assad activity, will be less likely to capitulate than other towns in which similar events have previously transpired.

