

Syria Situation Report: January 24 - February 7, 2018

1 February 1: Israel Reportedly Supports New Opposition Offensive against Islamic State in Southern Syria: Opposition forces launched a new offensive, entitled “Battle of the Conquerors,” to clear Islamic State (IS)-affiliate Jaish Khaled bin al-Waleed from western Daraa province. Israel reportedly supported the initial opposition attack with cross-border shelling from the Golan Heights, though opposition sources denied any cooperation with Israel.

2 January 26-29: Ceasefire Fails to Curb Regime Violence in East Ghouta: Ahmad Ramadan, spokesperson for the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), stated that opposition and regime delegates signed a 48-hour ceasefire deal for the besieged, rebel-held East Ghouta suburbs of Damascus at UN-sponsored talks in Vienna on January 26. The Russian Defense Ministry issued a statement on January 29 that urged the Syrian regime to adhere to the deal following the failure of the ceasefire to curb violence in East Ghouta on January 27 and 28.

3 February 7: Israel Targets Syrian Weapons Research Facility near Damascus: The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes on a Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) facility in Jamraya, north of Damascus. The SSRC is linked to the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons and missile program. Syrian state media claimed that air defenses intercepted “several” of the Israeli air-to-surface missiles targeting the facility.

4 February 2-4: Residents Protest HTS Withdrawal from East Idlib Province: Residents in the town of Binnish in Idlib province held demonstrations calling for the expulsion of Hay’at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS)—successor of Al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate—and the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government on February 2. Protesters condemned the withdrawal of HTS forces from towns and villages in eastern Idlib province ahead of pro-regime advances in the area. HTS responded to the protests with a widespread arrest campaign in Binnish, during which at least one civilian was killed.

5 February 3: Russia Targets Civilian Infrastructure in Idlib in Response to Downing of Jet: Hay’at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) claimed to down a Russian SU-25 aircraft over the town of Saraqeb using a Man-Portable Air-Defense System (MANPADS). The Russian pilot successfully ejected from the aircraft and was killed by opposition forces near the town of Maarsiran, south of Saraqeb. In response, Russia intensified its air campaign on opposition-held areas in northwest Syria. Local activists reported Russian airstrikes destroyed medical facilities in three Idlib cities. Syrian Civil Defense responders reported Syrian regime strikes on Saraqeb with several munitions containing chlorine gas.

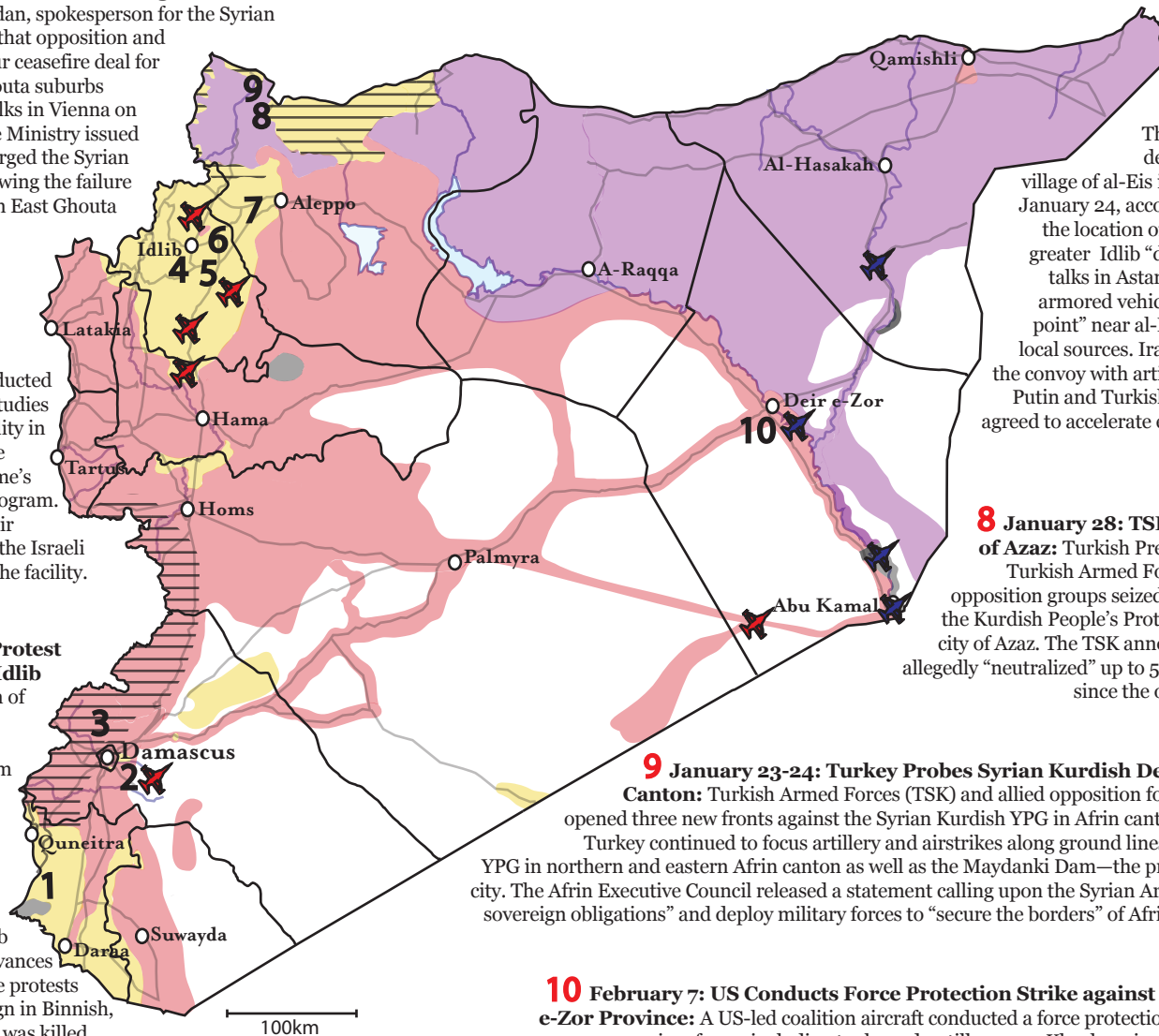
6 January 31-February 3: Pro-Regime Forces Advance Closer to Strategic Highway in Idlib Province: Pro-regime forces seized at least 20 villages along a broad front west of the Abu a-Dhuhur Airbase in eastern Idlib province following clashes with opposition groups. The advance brings pro-regime forces within nine miles of the key opposition-held town of Saraqeb on the strategic M5 highway between Hama city and Aleppo. Eleven opposition factions—including Salafist groups Ahrar a-Sham and Nour e-Din a-Zinki and former US TOW missile recipients Free Idlib Army and Jaish al-Izza—in Idlib province formed the “Repel the Invaders” operations room on February 2 to reinforce Saraqeb’s defenses.

7 January 24-31: Turkey Scouts New ‘Observation Point’ South of Aleppo: The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) deployed a military convoy to the village of al-Eis in southern Aleppo province on January 24, according to local activists, to scout the location of a new observation post for the greater Idlib “de-escalation zone” brokered at talks in Astana. The TSK deployed 50 to 100 armored vehicles to establish an “observation point” near al-Eis on January 29, according to local sources. Iranian forces reportedly targeted the convoy with artillery strikes. Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan reportedly agreed to accelerate efforts to establish “observation points” on January 31.

8 January 28: TSK Seizes Mt. Bersaya North of Azaz: Turkish President Erdogan announced the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and Ankara-backed opposition groups seized the strategic Mt. Bersaya from the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) north of the city of Azaz. The TSK announced Operation Olive Branch allegedly “neutralized” up to 579 Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters since the operation began on January 20.

9 January 23-24: Turkey Probes Syrian Kurdish Defenses on Borders of Afrin Canton: Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and allied opposition forces in Operation Olive Branch opened three new fronts against the Syrian Kurdish YPG in Afrin canton in western Aleppo province. Turkey continued to focus artillery and airstrikes along ground lines of communication held by the YPG in northern and eastern Afrin canton as well as the Maydanki Dam—the primary water reservoir for Afrin city. The Afrin Executive Council released a statement calling upon the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) to “carry out its sovereign obligations” and deploy military forces to “secure the borders” of Afrin against Turkish intervention.

10 February 7: US Conducts Force Protection Strike against Pro-Regime Forces in Deir e-Zor Province: A US-led coalition aircraft conducted a force protection strike on a large formation of pro-regime forces including tanks and artillery near Khusham in eastern Deir e-Zor province. US aircraft conducted the strike after pro-regime forces crossed a well-established deconfliction line and attacked a headquarters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-affiliated Deir e-Zor Military Council. Advisers from the Lebanese Hezbollah and Russian military contractors reportedly participated in the attack. US-led coalition personnel were co-located at the headquarters during the attack. The US-led coalition subsequently released a statement asserting its “non-negotiable right to act in self-defense.”



Areas of Control*

- Pro-Regime Forces
- Opposition Forces
- Kurdish Forces
- Hay’at Tahrir a-Sham
*Formerly Jabhat a-Nusra
- The Islamic State
- Mixed Control

Airstrikes

- ✈ Pro-Regime
- ✈ U.S. / Coalition



*THIS MAP DOES NOT DEPICT AL QAEDA CONTROL IN WESTERN SYRIA. ISW IS DEVELOPING A NEW CONTROL OF TERRAIN MAP THAT WILL ASSESS THE FULL EXTENT OF AL QAEDA PRESENCE IN SYRIA.

*Control of Terrain Accurate as of 08 FEB 2018

Text Credit: Sana Sekkarie

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