

Syria Situation Report: February 7 - 21, 2018

1a-b February 10: Israel and Iran Initiate Largest Confrontation Over Syria Since Start of the Syrian Civil War: Israel intercepted and destroyed an Iranian drone that violated its airspace over the Golan Heights. Israel later conducted airstrikes targeting the drone's control vehicle at the T4 Airbase in Eastern Homs Province. Syrian Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (SAMS) engaged the returning aircraft and successfully shot down an Israeli F-16 over Northern Israel. The incident marked the first such combat loss for the Israeli Air Force since the 1982 Lebanon War. Israel in response conducted airstrikes targeting at least a dozen targets near Damascus including at least four military positions operated by Iran in Syria.

2 February 17 - 20: Pro-Regime Forces Set Conditions for Major Offensive in Eastern Ghouta: Pro-regime forces intensified a campaign of airstrikes and artillery shelling targeting the opposition-held Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, killing at least 250 civilians. The strikes reportedly marked the highest 48-hour death toll in the Syrian Civil War since the 2013 Sarin Gas Attack in Eastern Ghouta. Pro-regime forces deployed thousands of reinforcements and at least ten warplanes to the Dumayr Airbase outside Damascus ahead of upcoming ground operations against Eastern Ghouta.

3 February 17: Opposition Group Assassinates Regime Officer Near Tartus: The 'Special Forces Company' of the Abu Amara Brigades - an opposition group affiliated with Salafi-Jihadist groups Ahrar a-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) - detonated a roadside IED that killed Deir e-Zor Province Military Security Director Brig. Gen. Jamal Razouk along the Tartus-Damascus Highway.

4 February 13: HTS Departs Key Town in Northern Homs Province: Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) - the successor of Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat a-Nusra - withdrew from Rastan in Northern Homs Province follow mass protests calling for its departure from the opposition-held town. The protests blamed HTS for the assassination of a member of a local negotiating committee. Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliate Liwa Rijal Allah confirmed the departure and claimed to detain the fighters responsible for the assassination.

5 February 12: 'Hundreds' of IS Fighters Surrender to Turkish-Backed Operations Room in Idlib Province: Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) and the 'Repel the Invaders' Operations Room backed by Turkey announced the complete surrender of at least 350 IS fighters in the town of Khuwayn in Southern Idlib Province. Activists and opposition sources accused the Pro-Regime Coalition of facilitating the transfer of IS from Hama Province to Southern Idlib Province.

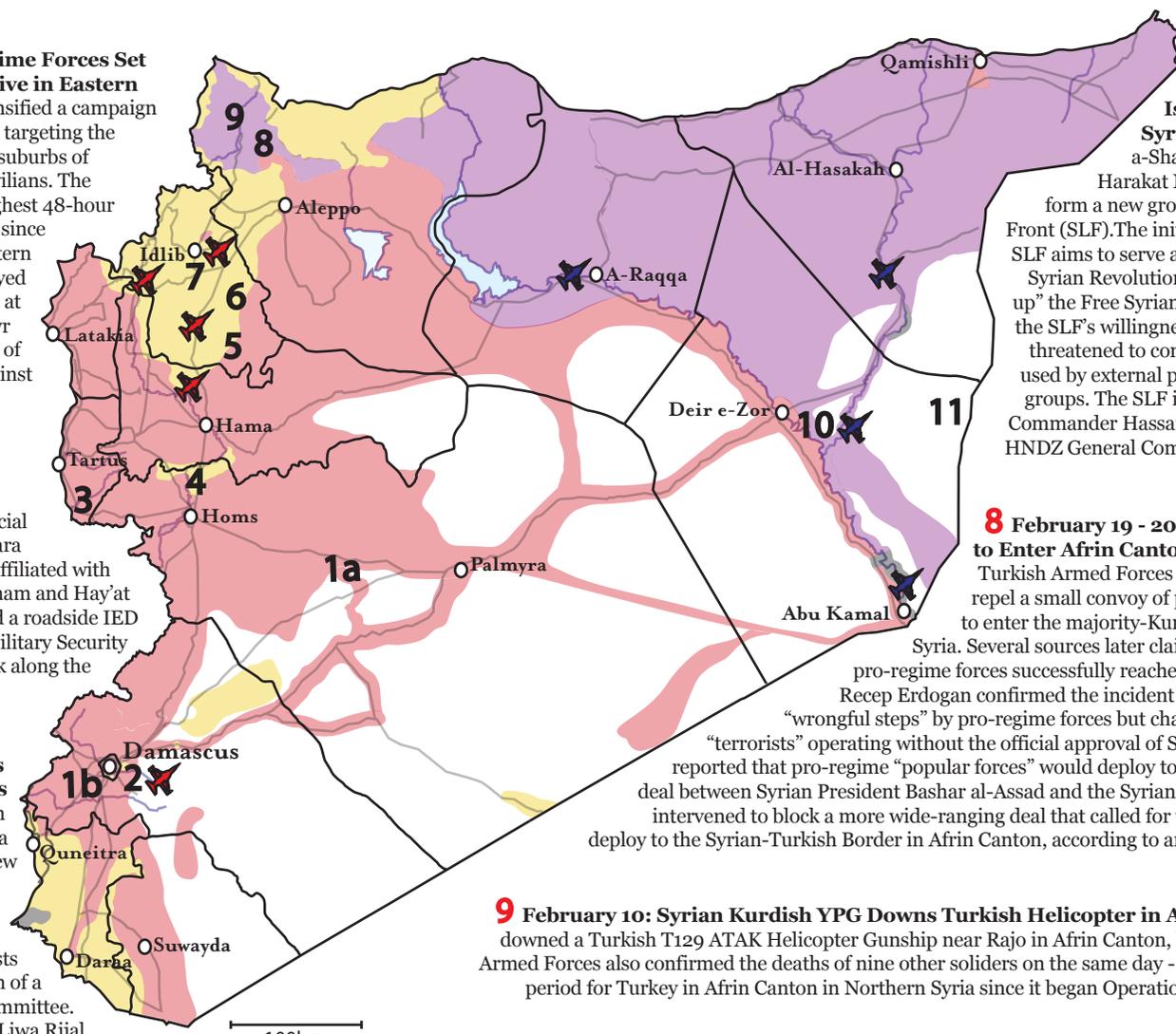
6 February 9 - 15: Turkey Creates Two Additional Observation Points in Idlib Province: The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) established two new observation points near the towns of Tal Tuqan and Surman in Eastern Idlib Province on February 9 and February 15, respectively. The TSK also reportedly scouted the Taftanaz Airbase north of Idlib City as well as the Wadi Deif Military Base near Khan Sheikhoun in Southern Idlib Province. Turkey established a similar observation post at Al-Eis in Southern Aleppo Province on February 5. The Russian Armed Forces later deployed a contingent of military police to the regime-held town of Hadher opposite Al-Eis in Southern Aleppo Province on February 14.

7 February 18: Ahrar a-Sham Merges with Key Islamist Group in Northern Syria: Salafi-Jihadist group Ahrar a-Sham merged with Islamist group Harakat Nour a-Din a-Zenki (HNDZ) to form a new group called the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF). The initial statement asserted that the SLF aims to serve as the "nucleus that unifies" the Syrian Revolution as well as a "base for building up" the Free Syrian Army. The statement stressed the SLF's willingness to work with all factions but threatened to confront groups that act as a "tool used by external powers to eliminate" opposition groups. The SLF is led by Ahrar a-Sham General Commander Hassan Soufan with his deputy being HNDZ General Commander Tawfiq Shahab a-Din.

8 February 19 - 20: Regime Fighters Attempt to Enter Afrin Canton after Deal with YPG: The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) fired "warning" shells to repel a small convoy of pro-regime fighters attempting to enter the majority-Kurdish Afrin Canton in Northern Syria. Several sources later claimed that a small contingent of pro-regime forces successfully reached Afrin City. Turkish President Recep Erdogan confirmed the incident and warned against any future "wrongful steps" by pro-regime forces but characterized the convoy as rogue "terrorists" operating without the official approval of Syria. Syrian state media earlier reported that pro-regime "popular forces" would deploy to Afrin Canton under a bilateral deal between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Kurdish YPG. Russia allegedly intervened to block a more wide-ranging deal that called for the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) to deploy to the Syrian-Turkish Border in Afrin Canton, according to anonymous pro-regime sources.

9 February 10: Syrian Kurdish YPG Downs Turkish Helicopter in Afrin: The Syrian Kurdish YPG downed a Turkish T129 ATAK Helicopter Gunship near Rajo in Afrin Canton, killing both pilots. The Turkish Armed Forces also confirmed the deaths of nine other soldiers on the same day - marking the deadliest 24-hour period for Turkey in Afrin Canton in Northern Syria since it began Operation Olive Branch on January 20.

10 February 10: Pro-Regime Probing Efforts Prompt New U.S. Strike in Eastern Syria: The U.S. conducted an airstrike targeting a pro-regime T-72 Main Battle Tank after it fired upon positions occupied by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and U.S. Special Operations Forces near Khusham in Deir e-Zor Province in Eastern Syria. The U.S. conducted a major force protection strike against a large formation of several hundred pro-regime fighters including Russian PMCs and Iranian-Backed Proxies that attacked an SDF headquarters near Khusham on February 7.



Areas of Control*

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

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 22 FEB 2018