

Syria Situation Report: June 10 - 23, 2020

1 June 10-16: Turkish and Russian Forces Conduct Two Longer Patrols, Nearing Jisr al-Shughour. Turkish and Russian forces conducted their 16th joint patrol on the M4 Highway from al Tarnaba to Jannat al-Qura in Idlib Province on June 10. Protesters reportedly associated with al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) threw rocks at the Russian vehicles as they passed on the M4 Highway in Ariha, Idlib Province. Members of HTS later attacked media activists and confiscated their equipment for photographing the protesters in Ariha. Russian and Turkish forces conducted their 17th joint patrol along 40km of the M4 Highway from al-Tarnaba to Kufayr, outside Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province, on June 16. This is the longest patrol of the M4 Highway to date.

2 June 10-22: Syrian Regime Forces Retaliate against Week-long Anti-Assad Protests in Suwayda Province. Protesters demonstrated against the Syrian regime for nearly a week in Suwayda City, Suwayda Province, calling for the overthrow of the Assad regime and the expulsion of Russian and Iranian forces. In response, unspecified Syrian regime security forces violently dispersed a protest in Suwayda City and arrested at least nine protesters. The Syrian Regime's Suwayda Security Committee transferred nine detained protesters from Suwayda Province to stand trial in Damascus City on terrorism charges. Three other protesters will be tried in Suwayda Province.

3 June 12: Newly Formed al-Qaeda Operations Room under Defected HTS Leadership Likely to Target Pro-regime Forces, HTS, and Turkey. Five al Qaeda-affiliated groups released a statement announcing the formation of the "Stand Firm Operations Room" in Greater Idlib Province on June 12. The operations room is comprised of Hurras al-Din (HaD), Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Islam, Coordination of Islam, and the previously unknown Ansar Combat Brigade; the latter two are led by defected Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) officials. The stated goal of the operations room is to "push away the assault of the aggressor" and to "break the plots of the occupiers," likely referring to pro-regime forces and Turkey.

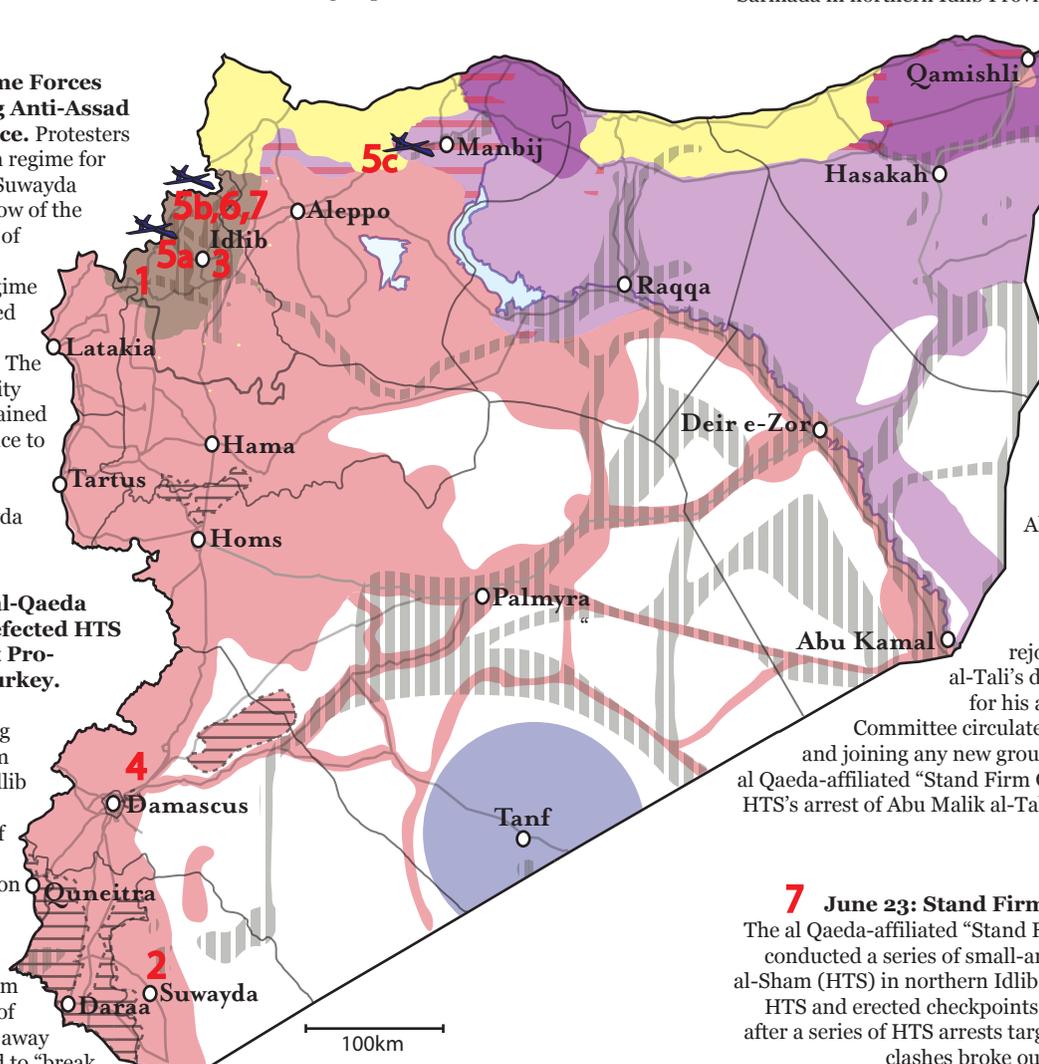
4 June 13: Defection of Regime Fighters Indicates Low Morale among SAA Forces. Clashes broke out in Dumayr, 39 km northeast of Damascus, after regime security forces attempted to arrest seven defectors from the Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Armored Division. Pro-regime units, including Iranian-backed forces, armored units, and rotary-wing units, deployed to the city to address the situation. Several of the defectors, who were regime-reconciled rebels, died in the ensuing clashes. There has been no notable insurgent activity in Dumayr or the greater Eastern Qalamoun area since the regime takeover in April 2018.

5a-c June 14-20: Three Likely US Drone Strikes Target al Qaeda-affiliated Leaders and a Key ISIS Figure. A likely US drone strike killed two senior officials of al Qaeda-affiliated Hurras al-Din (HaD) near the Shuaib Mosque on the western outskirts of Idlib City on the night of June 14-15. The strike killed HaD Shura Council member Khaled al-Arouri (aka Qassam al-Urduni) and Bilal al-Sana'ani, the head of HaD constituent group Jaysh al-Badia. Al-Arouri is of Jordanian nationality and al-Sana'ani is of Yemeni nationality. A separate explosion struck a headquarters belonging to al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) south of the town of Sarmada in northern Idlib Province. Unconfirmed reports from local pro-opposition

sources claimed the explosion was the result of a US airstrike and that there were no casualties. An unidentified drone strike later killed former emir of ISIS in Raqqa, Fayez al-Akal, alias Abu Saad Al Shamali, near al-Bab, Eastern Aleppo Province, on June 20. The strike also reportedly killed Izzu al-Akal, senior ISIS operative in eastern Syria and brother of Fayez al-Akal. Fayez al-Akal and Izzu al-Akal possessed identification cards produced by a local council in Aleppo Province with false identities.

6 June 22: HTS Arrests Former Senior Leader in Attempt to Discourage Further Defections from the Group. Al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) arrested Abu Malik al-Tali in Sarmada, north of Idlib City, on June 22. Al-Tali was previously a member of the group's Shura Council and Chairman of the group's Supreme Oversight and Supervisory Committee. Abu Malik al-Tali resigned from his position for unspecified political reasons on April 7, though he reportedly rejoined the group after his resignation. HTS later cited al-Tali's defection and formation of a new group as the reason for his arrest. In addition, HTS's Oversight and Supervisory Committee circulated a memo prohibiting HTS members from defecting and joining any new group without the Committee's approval. Separately, the al Qaeda-affiliated "Stand Firm Operations Room" released a statement condemning HTS's arrest of Abu Malik al-Tali. Al-Tali is the leader of the Ansar Combat Brigade, a member of the "Stand Firm Operations Room."

7 June 23: Stand Firm Operations Room Attacks HTS over Arrests. The al Qaeda-affiliated "Stand Firm Operations Room," led by Hurras al-Din (HaD), conducted a series of small-arms attacks on fellow al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in northern Idlib Province. The operations room issued a call against HTS and erected checkpoints within HTS-controlled northwestern Idlib Province after a series of HTS arrests targeting defectors and critics of the group. Small-arms clashes broke out between Stand Firm and HTS across western Idlib Province after HaD deployed the checkpoints. "Stand Firm Operations Room" fighters seized control of Idlib Central Prison in Idlib City during the clashes, according to an unconfirmed report in pro-opposition media.



- Pro-Regime
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- U.S. and Partner Forces
- ISIS Support Zones
- SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- Al Qaeda-Dominated*
- Turkey-Opposition
- ✈ U.S. Drone 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 June 25, 2020



SYRIA
direct

Contributors: Blane Wallace and Will Christou ©2020 by the Institute for the Study of War

Key Takeaway: Internal fighting between al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Greater Idlib Province may escalate as the newly formed "Stand Firm Operations Room" challenges fellow al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) for control in Idlib. The "Stand Firm Operations Room" was created by five al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, some of which are led by HTS defectors. HTS and the "Stand Firm Operations Room" clashed after the latter established several checkpoints in HTS-dominated northern Idlib Province. Al Qaeda-affiliated groups may continue to fight for control of Idlib and may risk their previous unity in the fight against the Assad regime.