

Syria Situation Report: May 13 - 26, 2020

1 May 9-15: Russian-backed Negotiations Prevent Major Regime Operation in Daraa Province but Fail to Stop Violence. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) deployed reinforcements around Tafas on May 13-14 in an attempt to capture a group of wanted individuals. The individuals had reportedly escaped to Tafas in western Daraa on May 9, leading to a standoff between pro- and anti-Assad groups. The Russian Center for Reconciliation sent a delegation to negotiate with the Russian-supported Daraa Central Committee in an attempt to resolve the standoff on May 15. The negotiators reached an agreement to prevent the regime launching a security operation, although violence and anti-regime activity remain ongoing in Tafas and other areas of Daraa Province.

2 May 17: Possible ISIS Militants Assassinate Salafi-Jihadi Commander from Caucasus Region in Northern Idlib Province. Unknown assailants assassinated Abdullah Tsumada, a Salafi-Jihadi commander, in the town of Fu'ah in northern Idlib Province on May 17. Unclear Russian media reports described Tsumada as the leader of either the al-Qaeda affiliated "Caucasus Emirate" or the ISIS subgroup Wilayat Kavkaz, although this has not been verified by outside sources. Unverified Russian media reports allege the assassins were ISIS fighters.

3 May 19: Likely Israeli Airstrike Targets SAA 5th Division for First Time in Daraa Province. Likely Israeli aircraft targeted the headquarters of the Iranian-linked Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 5th Mechanized Division near the town of Izra, northeastern Daraa Province, on May 19. This is the first known instance of Israel targeting the SAA 5th Division. Outgoing Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennet stated that Iranian forces have begun withdrawing from Syria "under the weight of Israeli bombing" on May 18.

4 May 20: Longest Joint Russo-Turkish Patrol Indicates Expansion of Deal between Turkey and HTS. Russian and Turkish forces conducted their 12th joint patrol on the M4 Highway since the March 5 ceasefire, traveling approximately 22 km from the town of Tarnaba to Urum al-Joz, the longest joint patrol to date. Civilian protests backed by al-Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) blocked the path of previous patrols. Turkey may have given some additional concessions to HTS following on from a May 5 agreement between the parties in order to secure this extended patrol.

5 May 17-19: ISIS Continues to Target Syrian Regime Forces along the Border between Homs and Deir e-Zor. On May 17, ISIS elements killed between four and ten members of the SAA and allied Iranian-backed militias along the Damascus-Deir e-Zor Highway in eastern Homs and western Deir e-Zor Province, in addition to setting two cars ablaze and kidnapping four passengers. On May 18, ISIS ambushed SAA elements on the same highway in Suknah, Homs Province. On May 19, the SAA and National Defense Forces (NDF) sent additional forces to target remnants of ISIS elements in the desert area of al-Sham, Homs Province.

6a-c May 17-19: ISIS Activity in Daraa Province Accelerates as its Global Ramadan Campaign Continues. On May 17, ISIS militants assassinated two unidentified pro-regime militants in the towns of al-Jizah, southeastern Daraa Province, and al-Nimr, northwestern Daraa Province, respectively. On May 18, ISIS assassinated a member of the SAA 15th Division in southeastern Daraa province. On May 19, ISIS gunmen fired on two members of the SAA 7th Division in Kafr Shams in northern Daraa Province.

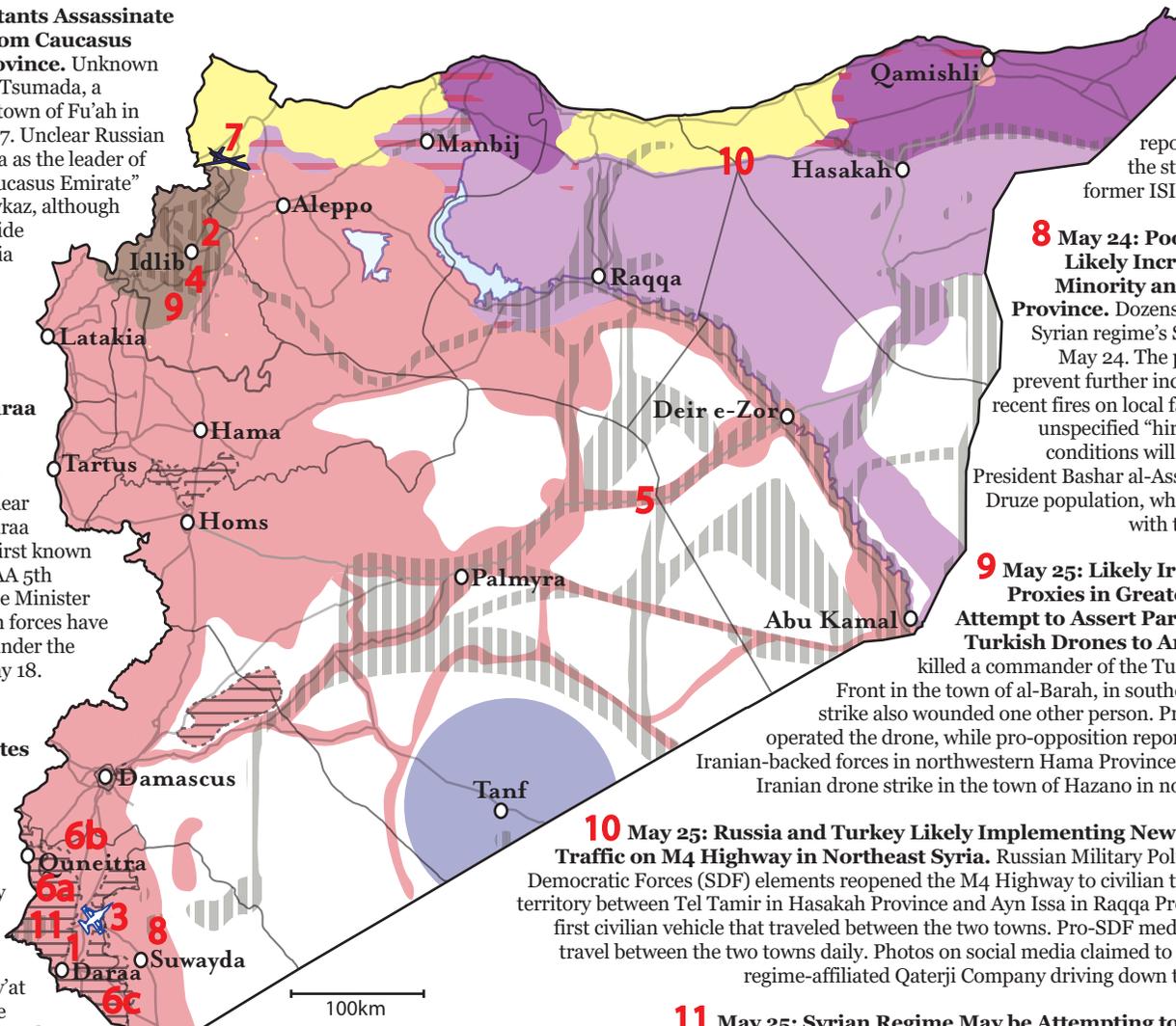
7 May 21: Possible US Drone Strikes Reportedly Kills ISIS Commander in Turkish-occupied Afrin Region. A possible US drone conducted a strike on a vehicle, killing three individuals inside. The vehicle was driving south of the city of Afrin in Turkish-occupied northwestern Aleppo Province. Pro-opposition outlet el-Dorar reported that one of the men killed in the strike was Abu Zaki al-Tayyibani, a former ISIS commander in Hama Province.

8 May 24: Poor Economic Conditions Will Likely Increase Tension between Druze Minority and Syrian Regime in Suwayda Province. Dozens of civilians protested outside the Syrian regime's Suwayda City Council building on May 24. The protesters called for the regime to prevent further increases in food prices and address recent fires on local farms which protesters blamed on unspecified "hired parties." Worsening economic conditions will likely further deepen fractures in President Bashar al-Assad's relationship with Suwayda's Druze population, which has remained broadly aligned with the Assad regime up to this point.

9 May 25: Likely Iranian Drones Strike Turkish Proxies in Greater Idlib Province, Possibly in Attempt to Assert Parity following Introduction of Turkish Drones to Area in February. A drone strike killed a commander of the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front in the town of al-Barah, in southern Idlib province on May 25; the strike also wounded one other person. Pro-regime media claimed the SAA operated the drone, while pro-opposition reports claimed the drone belonged to Iranian-backed forces in northwestern Hama Province. These claims follow a purported Iranian drone strike in the town of Hazano in northern Idlib Province on May 21.

10 May 25: Russia and Turkey Likely Implementing New Agreement to Allow Civilian Traffic on M4 Highway in Northeast Syria. Russian Military Police (MPs) and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) elements reopened the M4 Highway to civilian traffic south of Turkish-controlled territory between Tel Tamir in Hasakah Province and Ayn Issa in Raqqa Province. Russian MPs escorted the first civilian vehicle that traveled between the two towns. Pro-SDF media reported that four convoys will travel between the two towns daily. Photos on social media claimed to show oil tankers belonging to the regime-affiliated Qaterji Company driving down the newly-opened stretch of road.

11 May 25: Syrian Regime May be Attempting to Supplant Russia-negotiated Security Agreements in Southern Syria with Own Series of Talks. The SAA's 42nd Brigade commander, Colonel Ghaith Dalla; the head of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), General Hossam Louqa; and the head of the Military Security Branch, General Louai al Ali, met with representatives from the Russian-backed Daraa Central Committee in al-Ajmi in western Daraa Province on May 25. The resulting agreement allowed the Iranian-backed SAA 4th Division to reinforce its positions and create new military checkpoints in Daraa City and several other towns. The regime's Military Security will also reestablish its branch in Jalín, Daraa Province.



- Pro-Regime
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain
- U.S. and Partner Forces
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- Turkey-Opposition
- ISIS Support Zones
- SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence
- Israeli Airstrikes
- Al Qaeda-Dominated*
- ✈ 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 May 28, 2020



SYRIA direct

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Key Takeaway: Multiple ISIS attacks in southern and eastern Syria as well as a possible assassination in Idlib Province demonstrate the group's continued reach across Syria as it reconstitutes across both Syria and Iraq. The attacks occurred in late May and marked the culmination of ISIS's 2020 Ramadan campaign. A possible US drone struck a reported ISIS commander in the Turkish-occupied Afrin area of Aleppo Province, indicating the group may retain a presence in that area.