

Syria Situation Report: June 24 - July 6, 2020

1a-c June 23-24: Israeli Airstrikes Target Multiple Iranian-Proxy Positions. Likely Israeli aircraft conducted airstrikes on multiple Iranian-proxy positions, killing at least five and injuring several others in Kabbaj, Deir e-Zor Province and near al-Suknah, Homs, according to Syrian state media. Simultaneous airstrikes targeted an unspecified Iranian-proxy communication and radar center, killing two and causing “extensive” damage to the communication tower in Salkhad, southern Suwayda Province. A third set of strikes targeted the Syrian 47th Regiment and Lebanese Hezbollah positions in al-Salamiyah, eastern Hama Province.

2 June 24: US Drone Strikes Al Qaeda Commander in Greater Idlib. A US drone struck a car traveling near the city of Binnish, northeast of Idlib City on June 24, during clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din (HaD). Local sources report the car’s occupant, who was killed by the strike, was Abu Adnan al-Homsi, a senior logistics and equipment commander in HaD. Neither the US nor HaD had confirmed the strike or the target.

3 June 26: Prominent Druze Movements Publicly Condemn Regime Crackdown in Suwayda.

Prominent Druze militia Sheikh al-Karama held a meeting to address popular anti-regime protests in Suwayda Province. Protests have called for better living conditions and have prompted a regime security crackdown and the arrest of nine protesters. Sheikh al-Karama announced that the group is not satisfied with the regime’s response to the protests and its refusal to release the detained protestors. A larger umbrella Druze militia network, the Men of Dignity Movement, also released a statement condemning the regime’s response to the popular protests and warned against “deepening the rift” inside Suwayda Province

4 June 26-28: Al Qaeda groups clash in Idlib Province. Al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the al-Qaeda-affiliated “Stand Firm Operations Room”, led by HaD, clashed for several days from June 26-28. Reportedly 20 fighters were killed in the clashes. HTS subsequently brokered an informal agreement with Stand Firm Operations Room and called on opposition factions in Idlib Province to unify under the new “Great Conquest Operations Room” led by HTS. Despite the agreement, clashes continued in the village of Arab Said, northwest of Idlib city. HTS blocked off roads to the village and arrested Hurras al-Din commander Abu Omar Minhaj on June 28.

5 June 27: Quds Force Commander Ghaani Conducts Rare Visit to Syria. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds’ Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Esmail Ghaani visited the Syria-Iraq border city of Abu Kamal, Deir e-Zor Province. Iranian-backed forces retain a robust presence in Abu Kamal and recently built underground missile storage facilities at Iran’s Imam Ali Base south of Abu Kamal City. Abu Kamal allows Iran to maintain a land bridge between its Syrian and Iraqi proxies.

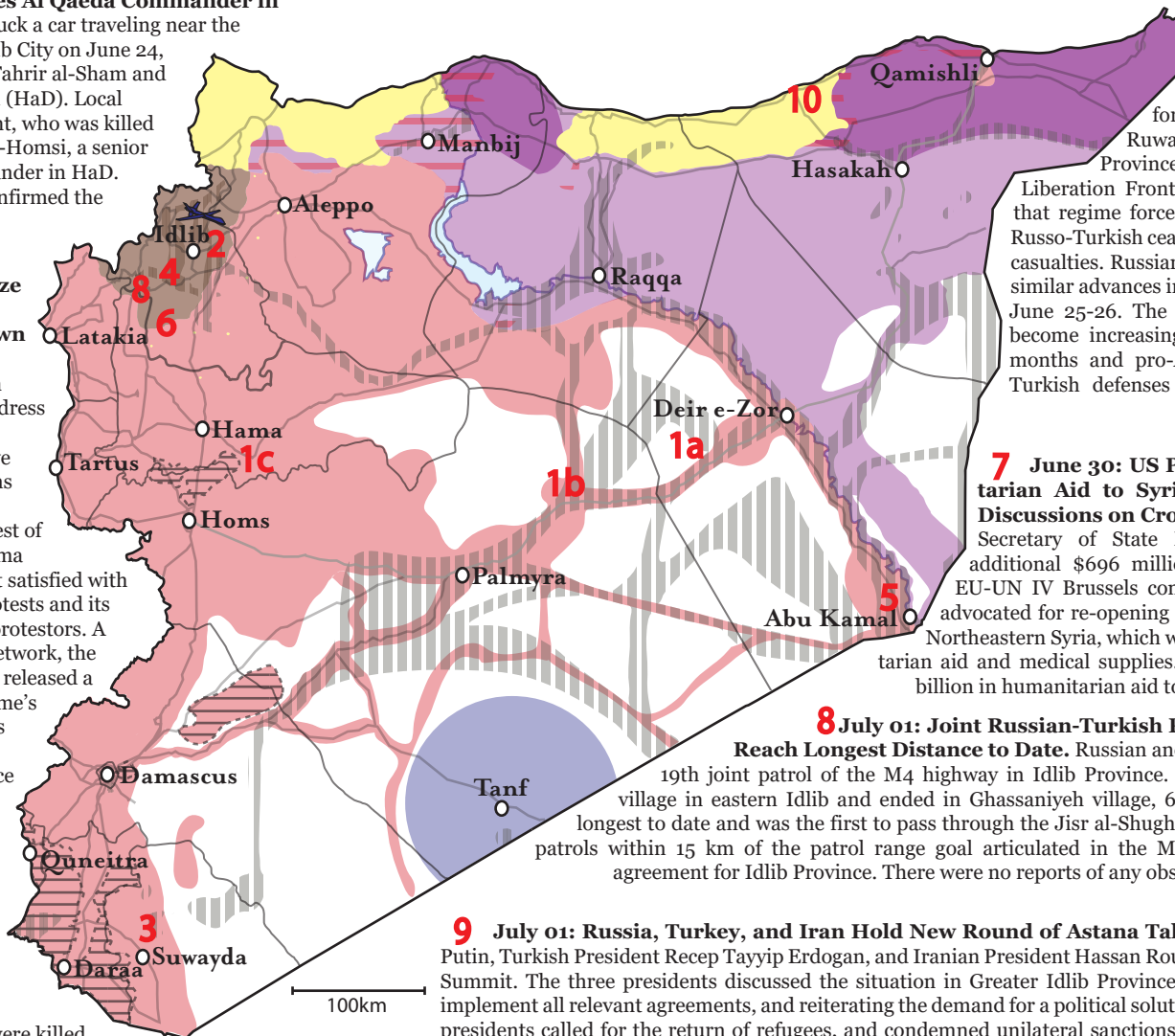
6 June 30: Pro-Regime Forces Test Opposition’s Defenses along Southern Idlib Frontlines. Unknown pro-regime forces temporarily advanced into Ruwayha village in Southern Idlib Province. The Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) disputed this, claiming that regime forces retreated across the March 5 Russo-Turkish ceasefire line after sustaining heavy casualties. Russian special forces previously made similar advances in the nearby village of Benine on June 25-26. The Southern Idlib frontlines have become increasingly militarized in the past few months and pro-Assad forces are likely testing Turkish defenses in anticipation of a renewed regime offensive.

7 June 30: US Pledges Additional Humanitarian Aid to Syria as UN Security Council Discussions on Cross-Border Aid Continue. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced an additional \$696 million in aid to Syria during the EU-UN IV Brussels conference on Syria. The US also advocated for re-opening border crossings from Iraq into Northeastern Syria, which would enable delivery of humanitarian aid and medical supplies. The US has contributed \$11.3 billion in humanitarian aid to Syria since the start of the war.

8 July 01: Joint Russian-Turkish Patrols Along Idlib Highway Reach Longest Distance to Date. Russian and Turkish forces conducted their 19th joint patrol of the M4 highway in Idlib Province. The patrol started at Tarnebah village in eastern Idlib and ended in Ghassaniyeh village, 60 km. The joint patrol was the longest to date and was the first to pass through the Jisr al-Shughour countryside. This brings the patrols within 15 km of the patrol range goal articulated in the March 5 Russia-Turkey ceasefire agreement for Idlib Province. There were no reports of any obstacles to this most recent patrol.

9 July 01: Russia, Turkey, and Iran Hold New Round of Astana Talks. Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani conducted a virtual Astana Summit. The three presidents discussed the situation in Greater Idlib Province, emphasizing the need to fully implement all relevant agreements, and reiterating the demand for a political solution to the war in Syria. The three presidents called for the return of refugees, and condemned unilateral sanctions, illegal self-rule initiatives, and Israeli airstrikes in Syria.

10 July 05-06: Turkey Leveraging Control of Water Supplies to Weaken SDF in Northeast Syria. Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), stopped pumping water at the Alouk Water Station 10km east of Ras Al-Ain on July 5. Turkish authorities later prevented employees of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces’ (SDF) Tel Tamr Water Corporation from entering the facility. Turkey and the SNA have turned off the pumps at Alouk Water Station multiple times since taking control of it in October 2019. The Alouk Water Station provides water to roughly one million people, including residents of Hasakah City.



● Pro-Regime

● Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

■ Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain

■ ISIS Support Zones

■ SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence

■ U.S. and Partner Forces

■ Al Qaeda-Dominated*

■ Turkey-Opposition

■ Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)

✈ 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

Key Takeaway: Recent infighting among opposition groups in Greater Idlib may complicate the possibility of cooperation against President Bashar al-Assad in the future. Al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) clashed with the Stand Firm Operations Room, a Hurras al-Din (HaD)-led organization of al Qaeda affiliates, for several days. While the two parties agreed to a ceasefire on June 26, sporadic fighting and inflammatory actions have continued and the situation may again escalate, threatening the ability of opposition forces to hold out against future regime advances and jeopardizing the internal stability of greater Idlib.

