

Syria Situation Report: February 18 - March 5, 2019

1 Mar 3: Al-Qaeda-Linked Group Raids Pro-Government Checkpoint in Northern Hama Province. Al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Tawhid conducted an overnight raid on a pro-government checkpoint near Masasnah in Northern Hama Province, killing at least twenty pro-government fighters including members of Syrian Air Force Intelligence. The raid occurred within the demilitarized zone around Greater Idlib Province brokered by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in 2018. The raid also marked the largest operation against pro-government forces by Ansar al-Tawhid since its formation in April 2018. Ansar al-Tawhid may have coordinated the raid with Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS), which conducted a similar raid on the same day in Northern Latakia Province.

2 Feb 25: Syrian Government Resumes Airstrikes in Greater Idlib Province. The Syrian Air Force resumed airstrikes on opposition-held Greater Idlib Province following a pause of several months under a deescalation deal brokered by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in 2018. Syrian airstrikes targeted multiple towns and villages across Greater Idlib Province including Saraqib, Kafr Zita, Ma'arat al-Numan, and Zurzur in the Ghab Plain. Russia reportedly did not conduct any airstrikes against opposition groups although its reconnaissance aircraft continued to monitor the frontlines around Greater Idlib Province.

3 Feb 25 - Mar 3: HTS Conducts Multiple Attacks in Retaliation for Pro-Government Shelling in Northern Syria. Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) announced the start of a series of operations called "And Heal the Bosoms of the Believers" against pro-government forces stationed around Greater Idlib Province. HTS stated that the operation was a response to a wave of pro-government shelling in opposition-held Idlib Province. HTS killed at least ten pro-government fighters using an anti-tank missile near Abu Duhur in Eastern Idlib Province. The HTS 'Red Bands' special forces also raided pro-government positions in Jabal Turkman in Northern Latakia Province.

4 Mar 1: Likely IS SVEST Attack Targets HTS Officials in Idlib City. An unidentified militant detonated an SVEST targeting a restaurant in the Dhabit District of Western Idlib City, killing at least nine individuals and wounding at least eighteen others. Officials from Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) were reportedly meeting at the restaurant at the time of the attack although it is unclear if any were killed or wounded in the blast. HTS later executed ten suspected Islamic State (IS) militants in retaliation for the attack on March 2.

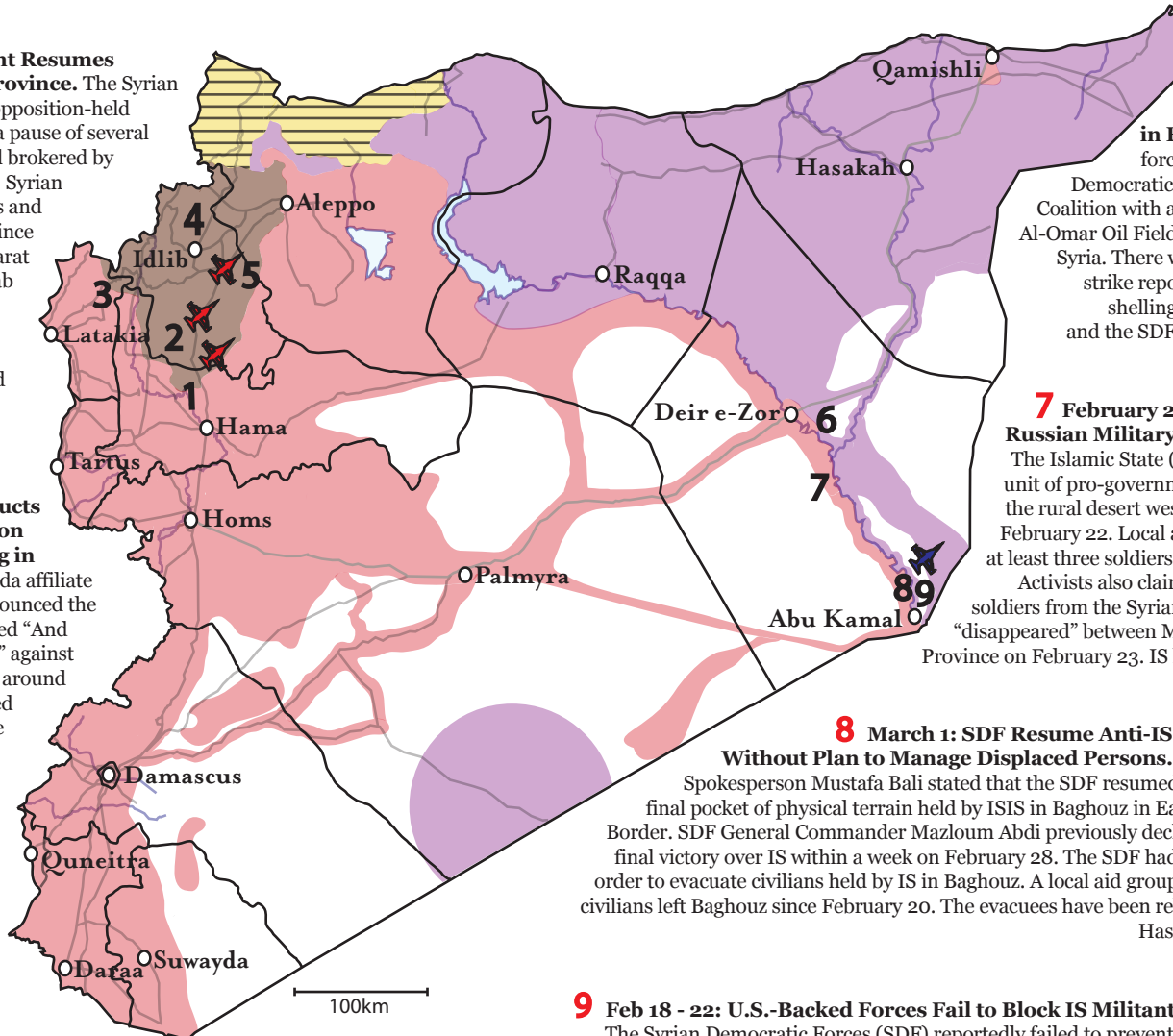
5 Feb 26: Turkey May Be Planning to Establish New Observation Posts in Eastern Idlib Province. The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) will reportedly establish six new observation points along frontlines between opposition and pro-government forces in Eastern Idlib Province. Turkey also reportedly requested that opposition groups including Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) cede control of the M4 and M5 Highways in Greater Idlib Province. Turkey will reportedly establish the new posts near the villages of Tel Touqan and Tel Sultan opposite the government-held Abu Duhur Airbase in Eastern Idlib Province but the exact locations are unknown.

6 Feb 28: U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition Allegedly Struck by Pro-Government Missile in Eastern Syria. Pro-government forces reportedly targeted the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition with a surface-to-surface missile in the Al-Omar Oil Fields near Deir e-Zor City in Eastern Syria. There were no reports of casualties. The strike reportedly coincided with cross-river shelling between pro-government forces and the SDF near Qouriyah west of Al-Omar.

7 February 22 - 23: IS Allegedly Captures Russian Military Personnel in Eastern Syria. The Islamic State (IS) reportedly ambushed a small unit of pro-government forces including Russians in the rural desert west of Mayadin in Eastern Syria on February 22. Local activists claimed that IS captured at least three soldiers from the Russian Armed Forces. Activists also claimed that a second group of nine soldiers from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 17th Division "disappeared" between Mayadin and Ashara in Deir e-Zor Province on February 23. IS has not yet claimed either attack.

8 March 1: SDF Resume Anti-IS Operations in Eastern Syria Without Plan to Manage Displaced Persons. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Spokesperson Mustafa Bali stated that the SDF resumed offensive operations against the final pocket of physical terrain held by ISIS in Baghouz in Eastern Syria near the Syrian-Iraqi Border. SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi previously declared that the SDF would achieve final victory over IS within a week on February 28. The SDF had previously paused operations in order to evacuate civilians held by IS in Baghouz. A local aid group stated that an estimated 10,000 civilians left Baghouz since February 20. The evacuees have been relocated to the Hawl IDP Camp in Hasakah Province in Northern Syria.

9 Feb 18 - 22: U.S.-Backed Forces Fail to Block IS Militants Fleeing from Syria to Iraq. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reportedly failed to prevent Islamic State (IS) militants from fleeing their final pocket of physical terrain in Baghouz in Eastern Syria towards Iraq, according to four anonymous intelligence officials from the U.S. and Iraq. The SDF previously rejected an attempt to negotiate a withdrawal of around 300 IS militants from Baghouz to Iraq or Idlib Province in Northern Syria on February 18. The SDF turned over at least 150 IS militants and affiliated family members to Iraq as part of an agreement to hand over 502 IS militants on February 21.



Areas of Control*

- Pro-Regime
- Al Qaeda-Dominated
- The Islamic State
- Turkish/Opposition Forces
- U.S.-Led Coalition and Partner Forces

Airstrikes

- Pro-Regime
- U.S. / Coalition



*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 07 MAR 2019