

Syria Situation Report: August 5 - 18, 2020

1 Aug. 5 - 9: Syrian Regime Seeks to Capitalize on Instability in SDF-held Deir e-Zor. Dignitaries of the Akidat Tribe announced the formation of the “Akidat Army” to target the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in regime-held Deir e-Zor city on August 9. The pro-regime sheikh of the Baggara Tribe, Nawaf Ragheb Al-Bashir, previously called for Arab tribes to “liberate” the eastern Euphrates and remove the SDF and the US-led international coalition on August 5.

2 Aug. 11: Major Tribe Issues One Month Ultimatum to US-led Coalition to Allow Arab Tribes to Govern in Deir e-Zor. Leaders from the Akidat Tribe issued a statement to the US-led Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF – OIR) demanding the formation of a committee to investigate recent assassinations, the transfer of the administration of Deir e-Zor to Arab tribes, the release of innocent detainees, the removal of women and children from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and for all parties to advance the process of a political solution in Syria. They gave the CJTF – OIR one month to fulfill their demands.

3 Aug. 12: Iranian Efforts to Expand Influence in Quneitra Province May Trigger Escalation between Iran and Israel in Southern Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies are attempting to create a new militia in Quneitra Province on the Israeli-Syrian border. The unit will be under the direction of Hezbollah and the Assad regime’s 220 Intelligence Branch based in Sa’sa, southern Reef Dimashq Province. Two hundred people reportedly joined the new unit.

4 Aug. 13: HTS Arrests US Journalist in Continued Crackdown on Dissent. Al Qaeda-affiliated Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) security forces arrested a US journalist, Bilal Abdul Kareem, in Atmeh, Idlib Province, on August 13. Abdul Kareem posted an interview on August 12 with detained British aid worker Tauqir Sharif’s wife, who disclosed that HTS had re-arrested her husband on August 11. Abdul Kareem runs the news network On the Ground News and is known for his close contact with Salafi-Jihadist groups in Idlib.

5 Aug. 13: SDF Attempts to Rebuild Ties with Major Tribes through Meetings with Notables. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-backed Deir e-Zor Military Council Head and Bakir Tribe powerbroker Ahmed Abu Khawla hosted a meeting attended by 3,000 Akidat notables and a delegation from US-led CJTF-OIR in al-Suwar, Deir e-Zor Province. The Bakir Tribe issued a statement in support of the military council and called for an investigation into the assassinations of sheikhs in the region.

6 Aug. 13: US Continues Targeting of al Qaeda Members in Idlib in Effort to Reduce Group’s Capabilities. A likely US drone strike killed al Qaeda-affiliated military trainer and foreign fighter Abu Yahya al-Uzbeki near Sarmada, Idlib Province. Abu Yahya al-Uzbeki pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and served in a leadership capacity in Hurras al-Din’s military training.

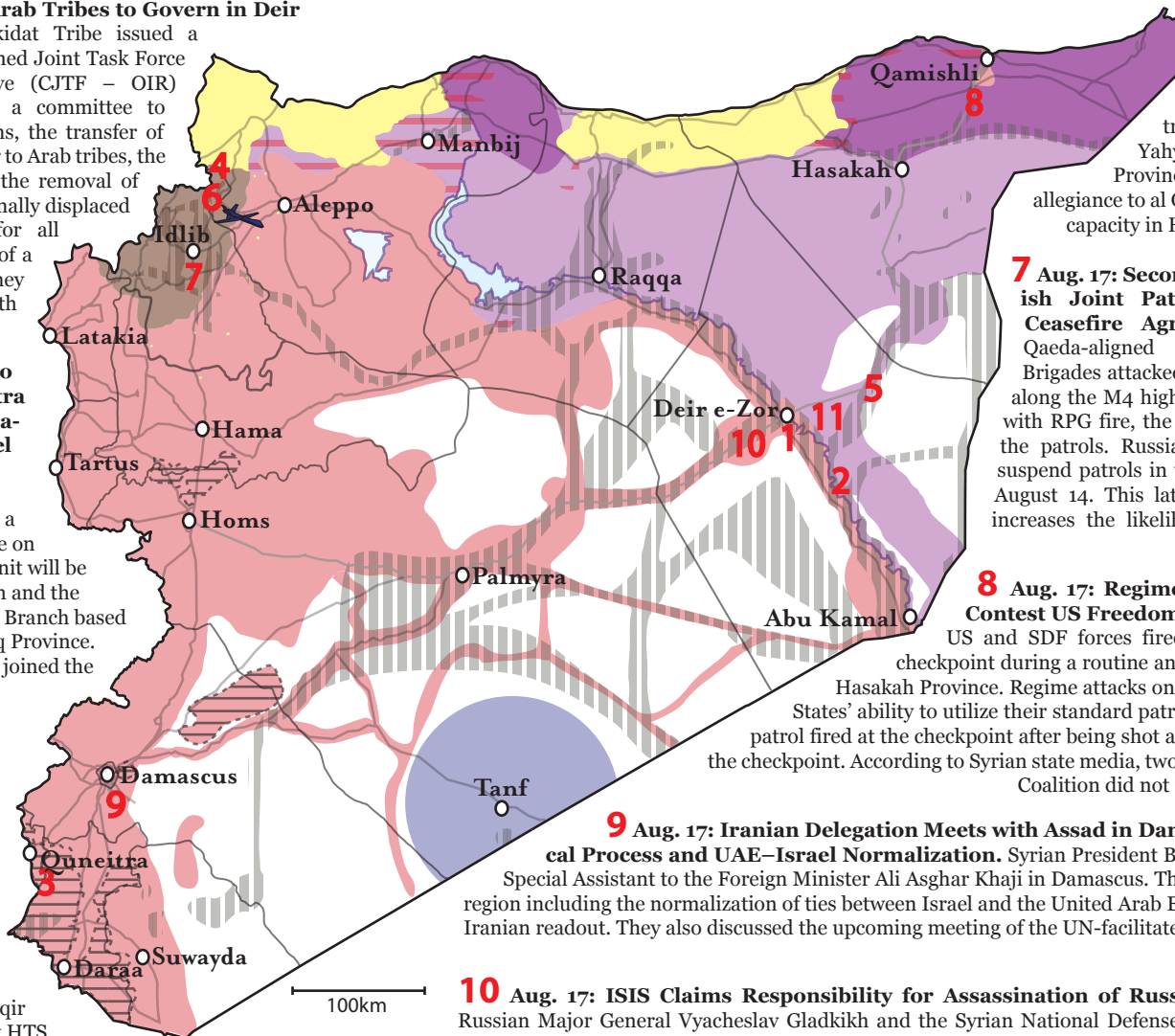
7 Aug. 17: Second Targeting of Russo-Turkish Joint Patrols Risks Breakdown of Ceasefire Agreement in Idlib. An al Qaeda-aligned group Khattab al-Shishani Brigades attacked a Russo – Turkish joint patrol along the M4 highway near Ariha, Idlib Province, with RPG fire, the group’s second attack targeting the patrols. Russia had announced its intent to suspend patrols in the face of security concerns on August 14. This latest attack on the joint patrols increases the likelihood of the ceasefire breaking down in Greater Idlib.

8 Aug. 17: Regime Forces Remain Willing to Contest US Freedom of Movement in Northeast. US and SDF forces fired upon pro-regime forces at a checkpoint during a routine anti-ISIS patrol near Tal al-Zahab, Hasakah Province. Regime attacks on US patrols challenge the United States’ ability to utilize their standard patrol routes in northeast Syria. The patrol fired at the checkpoint after being shot at by individuals in the vicinity of the checkpoint. According to Syrian state media, two regime soldiers were killed. The Coalition did not report any US or SDF casualties.

9 Aug. 17: Iranian Delegation Meets with Assad in Damascus to Discuss UN Political Process and UAE–Israel Normalization. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with Iranian Special Assistant to the Foreign Minister Ali Asghar Khaji in Damascus. They discussed the situation in the region including the normalization of ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), according to the Iranian readout. They also discussed the upcoming meeting of the UN-facilitated Syrian constitutional committee in Geneva.

10 Aug. 17: ISIS Claims Responsibility for Assassination of Russian General in Deir e-Zor. Russian Major General Vyacheslav Gladkikh and the Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF) Commander for Mayadin, Deir e-Zor Province, were killed in a roadside bombing near Al-Taym oil field, south of Deir e-Zor city. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.

11 Aug. 18: Likely Pro-Regime Katyusha Rocket Attack on CJTF-OIR Patrol Intended to Increase Security Pressure on US Forces in Deir e-Zor. Unknown militants fired three Katyusha rockets near a CJTF-OIR base at Conoco Oil Fields in eastern Deir e-Zor Province. The spokesman for CJTF-OIR stated that no there were no casualties or damage.



- Pro-Regime
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Turkey-Opposition
- U.S. and Partner Forces
- ISIS Support Zones
- Al Qaeda-Dominated*
- 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 August 18, 2020

Key Takeaway: The US partner force in northeast Syria is facing major challenges to its efforts to stabilize formerly ISIS-held areas of Deir e-Zor Province. The largest tribal confederation in Deir e-Zor issued the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition a one-month ultimatum, which expires on September 11, to give tribes the authority to govern Deir e-Zor in the wake of an assassination of a high profile tribal elder in early August. Both the Syrian Regime and ISIS are seeking to exploit tribal grievances with the SDF to expand their presence in Deir e-Zor. The regime is encouraging the formation of tribal forces that will threaten the security of US personnel operating in the area.



Contributors: John Dunford and Will Christou
©2020 by the Institute for the Study of War