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Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 3, 2020

1 Feb 19-Mar 3: Turkey Prepares for Major Offensive as Erdogan's Deadline for Regime Withdrawal from Idlib DMZ Expires: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that pro-regime forces must withdraw from the Greater Idlib demilitarized zone by March 1 or Turkey will launch a military operation to remove them by force. Turkey has deployed thousands of troops and established 30 new military bases in Greater Idlib Province since the start of February. The Turkish defense minister announced the start of "Operation Spring Shield" on March 1. Turkish forces have not yet participated in major ground operations against pro-regime forces. Erdogan is set to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 5.

2 Feb 20-26: Insurgents Increase Frequency of Explosive Attacks in High-security Areas around the Capital: Unidentified militants detonated an explosive device in a pickup truck in the Marjeh Square area of downtown Damascus on February 20, wounding two people, according to regime sources. Unidentified militants later detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in Umayyad Square in central Damascus and a small-scale vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in Baramkeh neighborhood on February 25. Militants detonated a car bomb targeting a Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) captain in the town of Qatanah west of Damascus on February 26. No group has claimed responsibility for any of the attacks.

3 Feb 22: Anti-Assad Group Claims Second Attack in Ongoing Low-level Northern Homs Insurgency: The anti-Assad insurgent group "Resistance Brigades in Homs" claimed responsibility for small arms attacks on three Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) checkpoints in the town of Talbiseh in northern Homs Province on February 21-22. The attacks resulted in casualties and injuries on both sides. The Resistance Brigades' only previous attack took place in Rastan on October 28.

4 Feb 23: Israeli Air Force Strikes Palestinian Islamic Jihad Facilities in Damascus: Israeli aircraft struck a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) training camp and weapons development facility in Adiya, Damascus. The Israeli Air Force was responding to an earlier attack on Israeli towns and settlements by the PIJ's military wing, the Al-Quds Brigades. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the airstrikes attempted to kill prominent PIJ Al-Quds Brigades leader Akram al-Ajuri, but were unsuccessful.

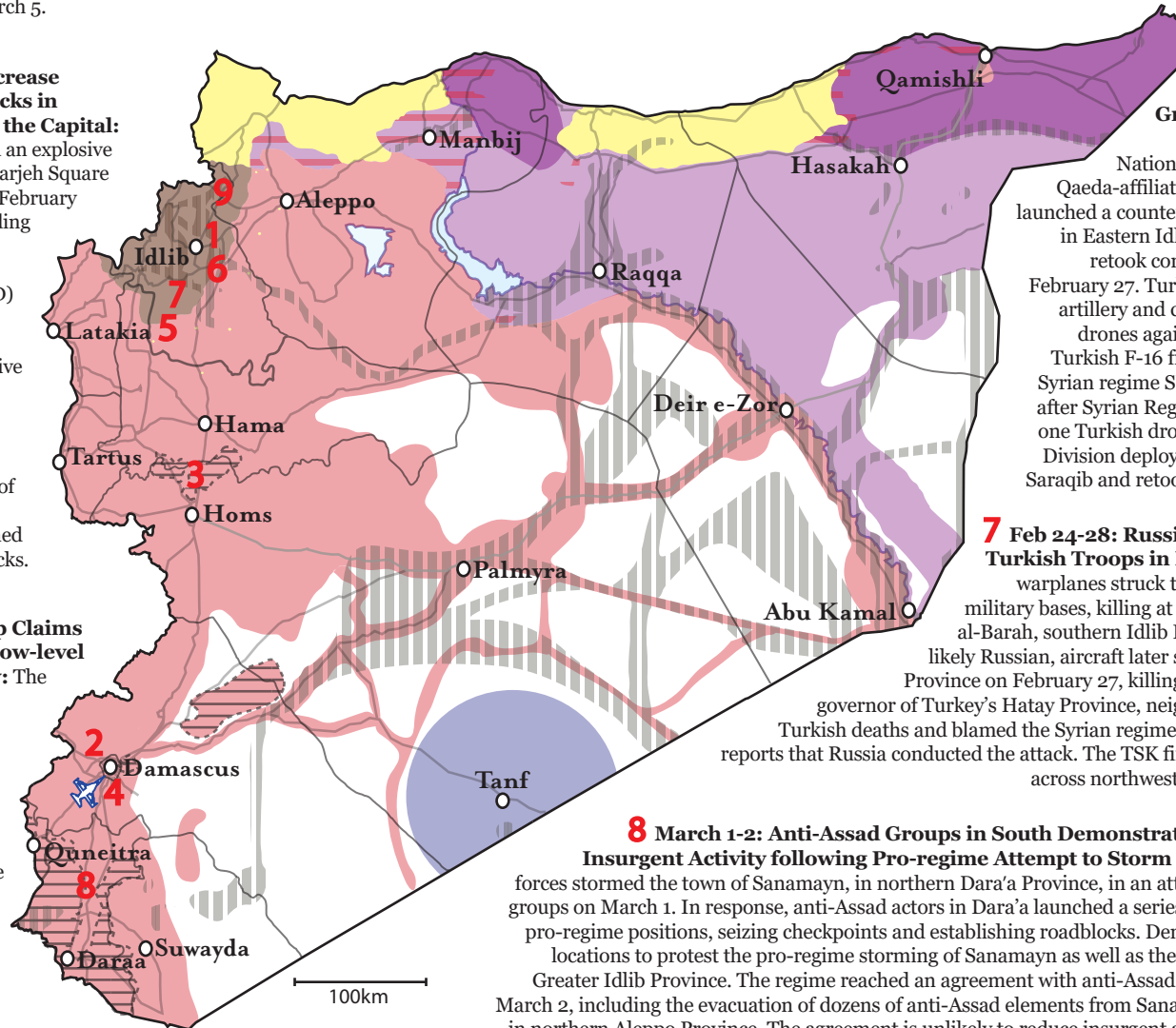
5 Feb 23-Mar 2: Pro-regime Forces Capture Land in Southern Idlib, Seize Symbolic City: Pro-regime forces, including the Iranian-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) and elite Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 25th Special Force Division, launched a new offensive in southwestern Idlib Province on February 23. The pro-regime forces seized control of the symbolic city of Kafr Nabl from anti-Assad forces on February 25 and the mountainous Jabal Shashabo region to the west on February 27. Anti-Assad forces were able to retake some of the lost terrain on March 1-2 with Turkish drone support following the redeployment of the SAA's 25th Special Forces Division to the front at Saraqib.

6 Feb 24-Mar 3: Anti-Assad Forces Temporarily Retake Key City with Turkish Support, Turkey Downs Regime Planes over Greater Idlib: Anti-Assad forces, including the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) and al Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), launched a counter-offensive against regime forces in Eastern Idlib Province on February 24 and retook control of the key city of Saraqib on February 27. Turkey supported the offensive with artillery and claims to have deployed predator drones against regime forces. On March 1, a Turkish F-16 fighter jet reportedly downed two Syrian regime SU-24 aircraft over Idlib Province after Syrian Regime air defenses downed at least one Turkish drone. The SAA 25th Special Forces Division deployed following the rebel capture of Saraqib and retook control of the city on March 2.

7 Feb 24-28: Russian Airstrikes Kill Dozens of Turkish Troops in Idlib Province: Likely Russian warplanes struck two Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) military bases, killing at least 10 soldiers in Kansafra and al-Barah, southern Idlib Province, on February 24. Other, likely Russian, aircraft later struck two TSK positions in Idlib Province on February 27, killing dozens of Turkish soldiers. The governor of Turkey's Hatay Province, neighboring Idlib, acknowledged 22 Turkish deaths and blamed the Syrian regime for the strike, despite numerous reports that Russia conducted the attack. The TSK fired artillery on regime positions across northwest Syria in response to the attacks.

8 March 1-2: Anti-Assad Groups in South Demonstrate New Level of Coordinated Insurgent Activity following Pro-regime Attempt to Storm Town: Unidentified pro-regime forces stormed the town of Sanamayn, in northern Dara'a Province, in an attempt to subdue local anti-Assad groups on March 1. In response, anti-Assad actors in Dara'a launched a series of likely coordinated attacks on pro-regime positions, seizing checkpoints and establishing roadblocks. Demonstrators gathered in multiple locations to protest the pro-regime storming of Sanamayn as well as the ongoing pro-regime offensive in Greater Idlib Province. The regime reached an agreement with anti-Assad representatives in Sanamayn on March 2, including the evacuation of dozens of anti-Assad elements from Sanamayn to Turkish-occupied areas in northern Aleppo Province. The agreement is unlikely to reduce insurgent activity in the south significantly.

9 Mar 3: U.S. Signals Support for Turkish Operation Spring Shield in Greater Idlib Province: U.S. Special Envoy to Syria James Jeffrey, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey David Satterfield, and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft arrived in Idlib Province on March 3 and met with members of civil organizations in Idlib Province to emphasize American support. The U.S. also announced an aid package of \$108 million to fund humanitarian assistance efforts in Greater Idlib Province. Jeffrey said the U.S. is willing to provide ammunition and humanitarian assistance to Turkish efforts in Greater Idlib Province.



- Pro-Regime
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- ISIS Support Zones
- Joint SDF-Regime Control
- Al Qaeda-Dominated*
- Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain
- Turkish-Dominated
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- U.S. and Partner Forces
- Israeli Airstrikes

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*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 04 MAR 2020