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# Syria Situation Report: February 19 - March 22, 2021

**1 Jan. 29 - Mar. 8: The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) renegotiates oil trade with the Assad regime, likely via Russian brokered deal.** The SDF paused its oil trade with the Syrian regime for unknown reasons in late January, then reopened trade on March 8. Russia likely intervened to broker a deal between the SDF and the Arvada Petroleum Company, which transports the oil from SDF-controlled refineries in eastern Syria to regime territory. The specifics of the Russian-brokered deal are unknown. The SDF and Assad regime both depend on their oil trade due to restrictive US sanctions limiting oil exports to and from Syria. The cash-strapped SDF will likely continue to supply the Syrian regime with oil as scarcity forces the Assad regime to pay premium prices.

**2 Feb. 20-22: Russia brokers a secret prisoner exchange deal between Israel and the Assad regime.** Russia brokered a deal between Israel and Syria in which the Syrian government would release an Israeli woman who illegally crossed into Syria in exchange for Israel's release of two Syrian farmers and Israel's purchase of \$1.2 million worth of Russia's Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine for the Syrian government. None of the governments involved publicly acknowledged the deal. Syria's ambassador to Russia, Riad Haddad, claimed the Russian government would provide Syria with an unspecified amount of Sputnik V doses but did not acknowledge Israel's role in securing those doses. Israel sees Iranian expansion along the Israeli border as a threat and has repeatedly worked through Russia to limit Iranian influence in southern Syria. Israel will likely work to ensure Russia maintains influence over its northern neighbor.

**3 Feb. 24 - Mar. 15: New anti-Hay'at Tahrir al Sham al Qaeda affiliate claims multiple attacks targeting Turkish forces in Idlib.** Al-Qaeda affiliate Ansar Abu Bakr al Siddiq (AABS) claimed responsibility for a roadside improvised explosive device (IED) attack targeting a TSK convoy near the town of Ma'arat Misreen, 10 km north of Idlib City, on February 24. AABS attacked a Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) armed vehicle in Sarmin, 10 km southeast of Idlib City, on March 15. Unknown militants, possibly AABS members, detonated a car bomb and killed an aid worker in Baksariya village, 3 km east of the Turkish-Syrian border, Jisr al Shugur, Idlib Province, also on March 15. AABS is a small, relatively obscure al Qaeda affiliate operating in Idlib Province; it is not pledged to any other Salafi-jihadist factions, and it actively opposes the Turkish presence in the province. HTS has recently attempted to crack down on rival jihadist groups operating in Idlib Province, most notably Hurras al-Din, while HTS attempts to preserve the Idlib ceasefire.

**4 Feb. 25: US airstrikes target Iranian proxies Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) in Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, in retaliation for proxy rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq.** The airstrikes destroyed 11 Iranian-held facilities and three vehicles transporting weapons across the KH-controlled Iraq-Syria border crossing, killing one KH fighter and wounding two other militants. The strikes were retaliation for missile strikes launched against US bases in Iraq by Iranian proxies, including KSS, on February 15, 20, and 22. Officers from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force trained Iranian-backed militias in Abu Kamal on Krasnopol missile systems on March 7, indicating that future missile attacks could target US forces and facilities in Syria as well as Iraq.

**5 Feb. 28 - Mar. 15: Israeli airstrikes target regime and Iranian-backed militia sites in Damascus.** Israeli aircraft launched several airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed militia positions near al Kiswa, 15 km south of Damascus, and the Damascus International Airport on February 28, likely in retaliation for the bombing of an Israeli ship in the Gulf of Oman. Israeli warplanes carried out five additional raids targeting two weapons depots belonging to Iranian-backed militias near Damascus International Airport on March 15. Israeli strikes raise the cost of maintaining infrastructure in Syria for Iranian-backed militias and could prompt militias that are already near residential areas such as al Kiswa to move their forces inside those neighborhoods to make Israeli airstrike targeting more difficult.

**6 Mar. 5-14: Regime forces conduct two rounds of missile attacks from Kuwairis Airbase targeting critical energy infrastructure in Turkish-controlled Syria.** Pro-regime forces, likely with Russian support, conducted coordinated missile attacks with surface-to-surface Tochka missiles from Kuwairis Airbase, targeting key oil infrastructure in Turkish-controlled Tarhine, al-Bab District, and Hamran, Jarablus District, in Aleppo Province on March 5. Regime forces then carried out a second round of missile strikes targeting the same areas on March 14. The two rounds of missile strikes caused large fires, killed at least four, and caused significant damage to key oil infrastructure. The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) did not retaliate for the March 5 attacks but blamed

the Syrian regime and shelled regime-held areas in Aleppo in response to the March 14 attacks—marking the first coordinated TSK retaliation for a pro-regime attack that did not have any Turkish casualties. The regime is likely attempting to degrade Turkish-backed governance in Syria by destroying energy infrastructure that is important to both civilians and military factions. Turkey may have initially refrained from allocating blame in advance of the Turkey-Russia-Qatar trilateral discussion on March 7 and likely continues to tactically deconflict with Russia.

**7 Mar. 5: SDF supports defected Gen. Manaf Tlass and the Transitional Military Council (TMC) ahead of Syria's presidential elections.** The SDF's official spokesperson, Kino Gabriel, announced his support for a new, opposition-led Transitional Military Council that intends to initiate a peaceful transfer of power, likely from Assad to a TMC-approved replacement, through the election process. The TMC, originally proposed by pro-opposition Syrian High Negotiations Committee Vice President Jamal Suleiman in a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on January 21, may seek to replace the Geneva process as a new method for negotiating opposition reconciliation to end the Syrian Civil War. The council initially claimed to have the support of existing Russia-backed opposition factions, but leaders in those factions claimed that was misinformation. Russia may be involved in the TMC's negotiations but is avoiding public affiliation with the council; Russian Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrantiev claimed that discussion of such a council was disinformation on February 16. The council has yet to build a public-facing coalition, but Gen. Tlass, a former regime ally, may use his position to gain influence in pro-regime circles. The SDF's endorsement could increase the regime's willingness to negotiate with the TMC.

**8 Mar. 5-16: Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) raid hospital, kicking off public protest and requiring US CJTF-OIR mediation with local tribes.** The SDF conducted an alleged counter-ISIS raid targeting the hospital of Shuhail, Deir ez-Zour Province, on March 5, provoking protests over the SDF's excess use of force. Arab residents of Deir ez-Zour conducted several protests of up to 75 people. Separately, residents in SDF-held Raqqa and Hasakah provinces have escalated anti-conscription sit-ins and strikes since March 1. The US vice special envoy to Syria and CJTF-OIR met with sub-provincial civil councils in Busayrah and Hajin on March 9 and 10, respectively, to negotiate on the SDF's behalf. The special envoy and the International Coalition also visited the Shuhail Hospital and demanded a formal apology from the SDF on March 16. US mediation may temporarily placate Deir ez-Zour residents and could pressure the SDF to offer tactical concessions to the tribes, including new releases from SDF detention centers. However, the protests have interrupted the SDF process of dividing the Deir ez-Zour Civil Council into region councils and could cripple SDF efforts to structurally reform local governance.

**9 Mar. 11: Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Qatar conduct first trilateral Syria meeting in Doha, Qatar.** The foreign ministers of the three states reaffirmed their commitment to Syrian territorial integrity and the UN-backed political process in Syria, including the Russian-backed Syrian Constitutional Committee. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the trilateral meeting format is intended to complement, not replace, the Astana format. Turkey will host the next trilateral meeting between the three states. The countries emphasized the importance of Syria's territorial integrity, in a likely effort to depict United States support to the Syrian Democratic Forces as illegitimate. Regional meetings involving Russia serve to legitimize Moscow's role in the Middle East, bolstering its status as a mediator. Turkey is likely bringing in Qatar to bolster the Turkish-Qatari roles in the Middle East as major powerbrokers—a shared objective for both governments.

**10 Mar. 14: ISIS claims rare attacks on government forces in Dera'a.** An ISIS militant shot an SAA officer in al-Harak, Izra District, Dera'a Province and shot, but did not kill, another SAA officer in the town of Jubailiya, Dera'a Province, both on March 14. ISIS's claimed attacks on SAA members may indicate that ISIS is conducting or abetting other attacks targeting the regime, which the regime attributes to remnants of the Dera'a opposition.

**11 Mar. 21: Russian and pro-regime forces target civilian infrastructure and transit routes near the Syrian-Turkish border in northern Idlib.** Russian Air Force aircraft struck a cement factory, a gas plant, and a commercial truck depot between the town of Sarmada, Idlib Province, and the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian-Turkish border. Meanwhile, unidentified regime forces launched rockets at the Al Maghara Hospital on the outskirts of Atareb, Aleppo Province, also on March 21. The Turkish Ministry of Defense released a statement calling on the Russian Federation to stop the attacks in the Idlib de-escalation zone. The Bab al-Hawa crossing is used to move goods between Turkey and Idlib Province and is the only crossing through which UN aid is permitted to enter Syria. Russia may be attempting to apply pressure on Turkey in order to force Turkish de-escalation near Ain Issa, where Turkey has repeatedly shelled SDF positions in response to missiles likely launched by the SDF towards Kilis, Turkey on March 18.

**Legend:**

- Pro-Regime
- ISIS Support Zones
- HTS-Dominated, Turkish Presence
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence
- Turkey-Opposition
- Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain
- U.S. and Partner Forces
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- Israeli Strike
- US Strike

**Key Takeaway:** The United States and Russia are exerting pressure to limit Iran's military and diplomatic leverage in Syria. The United States conducted several airstrikes targeting Iranian proxies in Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, on February 25, 2021, in response to a series of proxy rocket attacks in Iraq in mid-February. Meanwhile, Russia began several new diplomatic initiatives on the behalf of the Assad regime that could diminish Iran's potential economic and political leverage in Syria. Russia facilitated a deal to renew oil trade between the Assad regime and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), possibly reducing the Assad regime's reliance on Iranian oil. Russia additionally brokered a prisoner exchange between Israel and Syria in which Israel also agreed to finance the purchase of Russia's Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine for the Syrian government. Russia led trilateral talks with Turkey and Qatar that could be aimed at cutting Iran out of the peace process.

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