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Syria Situation Report: March 4-17, 2020

1 Mar 4: Turkish Drone Strike May Have Injured Key Syrian Arab Army Commander Suheil Hassan: Anti-Assad and Turkish sources reported a Turkish drone strike seriously injured Suheil Hassan, the commander of the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) elite Russian-backed 25th Special Forces Division. One report stated the Turkish drone targeted a meeting of SAA officers in Qamhama, Hama Province. Other reports stated the strike targeted Hassan in a SAA military convoy near Saraqib in eastern Idlib Province.

2 Mar 5-15: Putin and Erdogan Reach Fragile Ceasefire Agreement for Greater Idlib, Establish "Security Corridor" along M4 Highway: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin reached a ceasefire agreement for Greater Idlib Province on March 5. The two sides agreed to halt hostilities, establish a security corridor 6 km to the north and 6 km to the south of the M4 Highway, and conduct joint patrols through rebel-held areas of the M4 Highway beginning on March 15. The first patrol began in Tarnaba and reached the outskirts of Nayrab before having to turn around due to the roadblocks and protests. Opposition members held a sit-in on the M4 Highway in the towns of Ariha and Nayrab to block Russian vehicles from patrolling and let tire fires in the middle of the road. Al Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) reportedly provided transportation to the patrol areas to facilitate the anti-patrol protests.

3 Mar 5: Israel Strikes Iranian Positions to Impede Iranian-backed Militias from Increasing Foothold in Syria: Likely Israeli planes struck Shayrat Air Base and al-Qusayr Air Base in Homs Province. Both air bases reportedly host Iranian-backed militias. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) also launched surface-to-surface missiles at unidentified targets in Qahtaniyah, Quneitra. It is unclear what damage or casualties the strikes caused.

4 Mar 6: New IRGC-QF Commander Makes First Visit to Iranian-backed Groups in Western Aleppo Province: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Esmail Ghaani conducted his first visit to Syria. The exact timing of the visit is unclear, but Iranian media sources published an image of Ghaani in Syria on March 6. Ghaani reportedly met with Iranian-backed forces in the Shi'a towns of Nubl and Zahra, northwest of Aleppo City. Ghaani replaced former IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani.

5 Mar 6: Unknown Militant Group Assassinates IRGC-QF General in Southern Damascus: Militants assassinated IRGC-QF Brig. Gen. Farhad Dabirian in Sayyida Zeinab, south of Damascus City. The circumstances surrounding Dabirian's death remain unclear. Dabirian reportedly oversaw Iranian-backed forces near the Sayyida Zeinab Shrine in the area. Dabirian previously fought alongside pro-regime forces against ISIS in Palmyra, Homs Province.

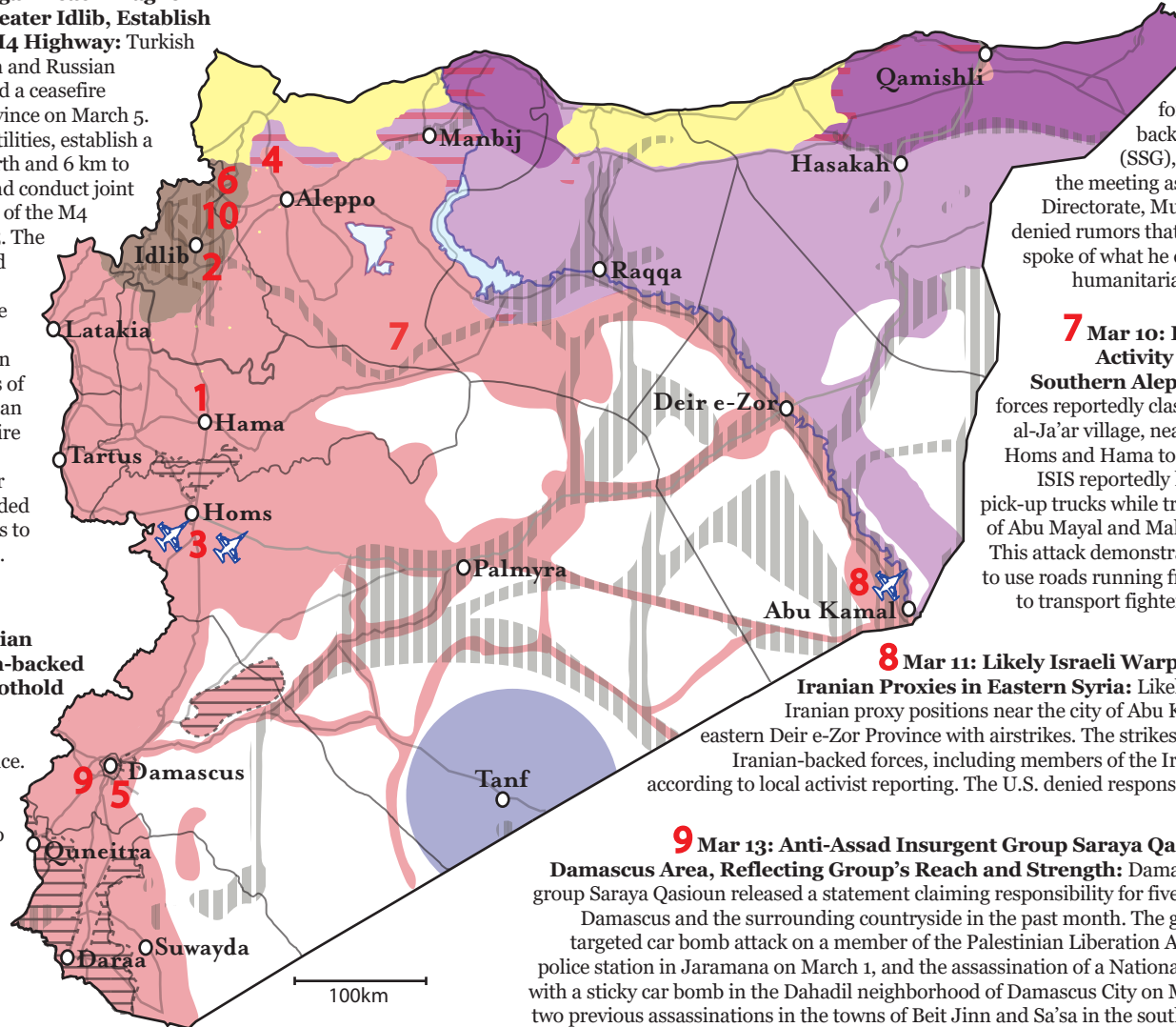
6 Mar 10: HTS Leader Joulani Holds Meeting with Dozens of Local Governance Officials: HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Joulani hosted a meeting with 60 local governance officials at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey on an unspecified date prior to March 11. The former prime minister of the HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), Mohammed al Sheikh, attended the meeting as did the head of the Idlib Health Directorate, Mundher Khalil. Joulani reportedly denied rumors that HTS is planning to dissolve and spoke of what he described as "corruption" among humanitarian organizations in Greater Idlib.

7 Mar 10: ISIS Engages in First Kinetic Activity along Prior Supply Route in Southern Aleppo Province since 2018: ISIS forces reportedly clashed with pro-regime forces near al-Ja'ar village, near a major highway running from Homs and Hama to Raqqa Province through Resafa. ISIS reportedly killed four civilians and stole two pick-up trucks while traveling west towards the villages of Abu Mayal and Makhlah, likely following the attack. This attack demonstrates that ISIS is likely continuing to use roads running from Raqqa City through Ithriyah to transport fighters and supplies to Idlib Province.

8 Mar 11: Likely Israeli Warplanes Conduct Airstrikes on Iranian Proxies in Eastern Syria: Likely Israeli aircraft targeted several Iranian proxy positions near the city of Abu Kamal and the village of Sayyal in eastern Deir e-Zor Province with airstrikes. The strikes reportedly killed 26 members of Iranian-backed forces, including members of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, according to local activist reporting. The U.S. denied responsibility for the strike on March 12.

9 Mar 13: Anti-Assad Insurgent Group Saraya Qasioun Claims Five Attacks in Damascus Area, Reflecting Group's Reach and Strength: Damascus-based anti-Assad insurgent group Saraya Qasioun released a statement claiming responsibility for five attacks on pro-regime targets in Damascus and the surrounding countryside in the past month. The group claimed responsibility for a targeted car bomb attack on a member of the Palestinian Liberation Army in Qatana on February 26, a police station in Jaramana on March 1, and the assassination of a National Defense Forces (NDF) member with a sticky car bomb in the Dahadil neighborhood of Damascus City on March 13. The group also claimed two previous assassinations in the towns of Beit Jinn and Sa'sa in the southwestern Damascus countryside.

10 Mar 14: Conflicting Reports Indicate HTS May Have Detained Senior ISIS Official in Western Aleppo Countryside: Al-Qaeda-affiliated HTS reportedly arrested senior ISIS official Abdullah Qardash in the town of Batabo in Western Aleppo Province, according to pro-opposition reports. The HTS Security Apparatus initially claimed they arrested an ISIS official identified as Abu Abdullah al Qurayshi and transported him to a high-security prison but later denied his arrest. It is unclear whether Abdullah Qardash and Abu Abdullah al Qurayshi are the same person or what their respective roles in ISIS are.



- 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 19 MAR 2020