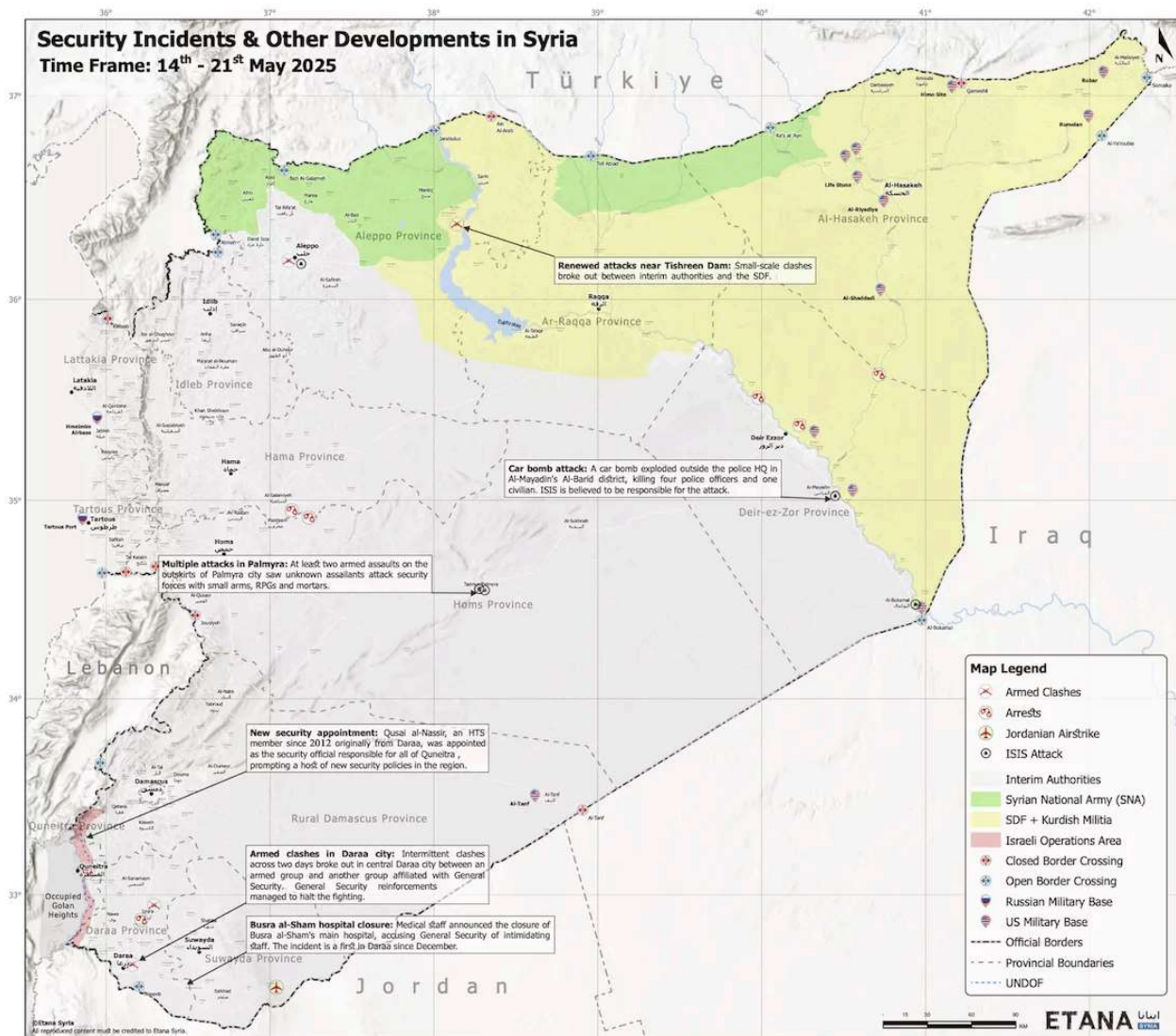


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Syria Update #25:

Despite the promises of recent diplomatic engagements and the lifting of US and EU sanctions, Syria's security situation remains fractious and fragile. The current status quo is defined by multiple threats—including resistance to interim authorities' control in Suwayda and eastern Daraa, simmering tensions with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and ongoing Israeli incursions and attacks in the south-west in violation of Syrian sovereignty. However, the possibility of a resurgent ISIS is arguably the most concerning of all these at present. US attempts to encourage Syria into signing the Abraham Accords may create backlash for interim President Ahmad al-Shara'a from within the Salafi-jihadi milieu in Syria and strengthen ISIS in the process. Al-Shara'a is treading delicately, and recent arrests of Palestinian fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other hardline groups may be an attempt to assuage US and Israeli concerns about potential anti-Israeli actors on Syrian soil. Seemingly cognizant of the factionalized, fragile military and security landscape in Syria at present, al-Shara'a's administration is trying to institutionally consolidate its control of General Security through the Interior Ministry—increasingly one of the main official fulcrums of power consolidation in Syria.



ISIS Reorganization

The latest issue of ISIS' propaganda arm, Al-Naba, recently attacked interim President Ahmad al-Shara'a for his recent meetings with US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The extremist group regarded al-Shara'a as an "apostate" and called on foreign fighters in HTS' ranks to defect to ISIS. This kind of continued propagandizing against the new authorities in Damascus potentially points to ISIS' strategic reorganization of its networks and priorities in Syria—and could presage more attacks in the future. Looking forward, al-Shara'a will also have to balance increasing obligations to the international community while managing his base, with former fighters from extremist groups such as Jund al-Aqsa and Hurras al-Deen potentially alienated by any steps seen to normalize with Israel or bring the new Syria into closer alignment with the United States.

ISIS has consistently attacked SDF targets in Syria's north-east, but only earlier this month [claimed](#) their first attack on interim authorities. On 5th May, cells killed two General Security fighters at a checkpoint in eastern Deir Ezzor, possibly in response to an increase in anti-ISIS operations by interim authorities. Since then, ETANA has recorded at least two separate attacks in and around Palmyra city, believed to be linked to ISIS, which saw unknown militants attack security forces with small arms, RPGs and mortars in late May. In the same week, an unidentified group attacked a house and two vehicles near the courthouse on the eastern outskirts of Palmyra before fleeing the area, the second attack of its kind in the same district in as many days. Additional security checkpoints have been set up in response.

Security Dynamics

Interim authorities have completed formation of ground divisions under the interim Ministry of Defense—on paper, at least—making way for the more complex work of forming military departments that effectively make up the army's technical and logistical backbone. There are still frustrations at the slow efforts to fully integrate all of Syria's armed groups: last week, Syria's defense minister publicly set a 10-day [deadline](#) for all groups to join the ministry. Meanwhile, negotiations about the future of armed groups in Druze-majority Suwayda remain thorny and unresolved. Talks involving Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri and Laith al-Balous (who is effectively representing interim authorities' position) are ongoing, although there is still little meaningful progress towards anti-government Druze factions joining the Ministry of Defense.

In the south, Interim authorities appointed Qusai al-Nassir ("Abu Saleh") as the top General Security official responsible for all of Quneitra province, including the border strip with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. An HTS member since 2012 and originally from Dael in neighboring Daraa, al-Nassir has already introduced a slew of measures aimed at restructuring and stabilizing security measures in the area, including: the confiscation of light and medium arms; the recruitment of security personnel; and the commissioning of security assessments on all security personnel in Quneitra to look for past or potential Hezbollah links.

Interim Governance

As part of ongoing attempts to centralize and consolidate institutions, interim authorities are [restructuring](#) the Ministry of Interior—by dividing its authority into five "states" (Damascus-Daraa-Suwayda; Homs-Hama; the coast; Idlib-Aleppo; and the north-east)—and appointing influential figures from the security apparatus into ministry roles. Former General Security chief Abu Bilal al-Quds was appointed deputy minister of interior, part of a broader move to sideline more factionalized General Security units in favor of centrally controlled police and Military Police.

Human rights organizations and activists have voiced concerns over centralization efforts in the humanitarian sector: Human Rights Watch [warns](#) that interim authorities are replicating Assad-era controls over aid operations. Strict oversight over aid groups in Syria is hurting their ability to expand operations. At the same time, Damascus is facing [criticism](#) for the establishment of two new bodies, the Transitional Justice Commission and the National Commission for the Missing, to address Assad-era violations. Activists are raising the alarm about the bodies' narrow focus: they

will only investigate crimes committed by the Assad regime, rather than all actors and armed groups.

Situation around Tishreen Dam

The 10th March [agreement](#) between interim authorities and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) appears to be holding for now, although frustrations in Damascus are growing with recent SDF activities on the ground and new demands from Self Administration representatives. Interim government and Self Administration representatives met recently in Hasakeh to discuss the implementation of the 10th March agreement, with re-integration of public institutions in the north-east and ISIS prisons up for discussion. But conflict in the area is not over: clashes between the SDF and SNA factions and pro-government units broke out near the Tishreen Dam the first time in weeks when the SDF reportedly attempted to infiltrate the Syriatel Hill nearby.

Israeli Attacks & Incursions in South Syria

Israeli forces continue to make regular incursions into Quneitra province. It appears the Israelis may be trying to isolate Hader from the rest of Quneitra province, after [opening](#) a medical point on the western outskirts of the town, shipping in food supplies, and restricting civilian movements. So far, the attempts at local outreach in Quneitra have not been well received: residents in Al-Asha village [burned](#) boxed of food aid distributed by Israeli forces in protest of the incursions.