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Syria Situation Report: September 16 - 29, 2020

1 Sept. 16 - 22: Recent ISIS Attacks Will Likely Foment Anti-Russian Sentiment in Daraa Province. Suspected ISIS militants detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in Daraa City on September 16, injuring two civilians. Suspected ISIS militants also attempted to assassinate the Syrian Arab Army's Russian-backed 5th Corps 8th Brigade Deputy Commander Ali Ahmed al-Sabah Al-Miqdad and finance officer Qasim Al-Sabah Al-Miqdad with an IED in Busra al-Sham, Daraa Province, on September 17. A former leader of the Free Syrian Army, Adham al-Akrad, held the Assad regime and Russia responsible for the recent assassinations and threatened them with protests in Daraa City on September 22.

2 Sept. 19 - 21: ISIS Tests its Ability to Coordinate Multiple Attacks across the Central Syrian Desert. ISIS militants killed three National Defense Forces fighters with an IED in al-Mayadin, Deir e-Zor Province, on September 19. ISIS gunmen killed 16 Syrian regime fighters during clashes in the central Syrian Desert between Aleppo, Hama, and Raqqa provinces on September 19 and seven fighters in an attack on pro-regime positions in Raqqa Province on September 21. ISIS militants attacked three pro-regime locations on the Ithriya-Khanaser Road between Aleppo and Hama provinces on September 21, killing five fighters.

3 Sept. 19 - 23: Recent Escalations May Indicate Imminent Pro-regime Offensive in Greater Idlib Province. Pro-regime forces targeted the perimeter of a Turkish Armed Forces observation post with artillery near Ishtabraq, Idlib Province, on September 20. The strikes caused a bush fire outside the observation post, but no casualties were reported. The elite units of the Syrian Arab Army's Russian-backed 25th Special Tasks Division attempted to infiltrate Kafr Nabl, Idlib Province, on September 22.

4 Sept. 20: US-backed Reconciliation Negotiations between SDF and Rival Kurdish Groups Reach a Significant Milestone. United States Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey met with representatives from the Kurdish National Council (ENKS) and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) - Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at an international coalition base in Hasakah Province. Jeffrey reportedly guaranteed the ENKS and PYD-SDF a federal territory in northeast Syria and is sponsoring an agreement between the two sides to create a supreme Kurdish political body.

5 Sept. 23: ISIS Expands High-value Assassination Campaign into Hasakah Province. ISIS assassinated the head of Syrian Democratic Forces military intelligence in Shaddadi, Hasakah Province. A pro-regime insurgency group, the Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region, falsely claimed responsibility for the attack. ISIS has successfully assassinated SDF officials and Arab tribal leaders in Deir e-Zor Province and is likely attempting to replicate this campaign northward in Hasakah Province.

6 Sept. 23 - 27: ISIS Likely Escalating Explosive Campaign against SDF in Deir e-Zor Province. Suspected ISIS militants detonated a motorcycle-borne IED targeting a Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) military vehicle in the town of al-Suwar, Deir e-Zor Province, on September 23, killing two SDF members and wounding four others. The SDF arrested two ISIS motorcycle mechanics and an unknown number of additional ISIS militants during a raid near As Sabhah, Deir e-Zor Province, on September 27.

7 Sept. 24: US Forces Establish a New Position in Northern Syria, Likely Increasing Their Freedom of Movement. One hundred US Marines and several Bradley fighting vehicles arrived to reinforce a coalition base in SDF-controlled Tal Tamr, Hasakah Province, on September 24. A permanent presence in the area will likely enable US forces to conduct patrols farther west than they have for the past year.

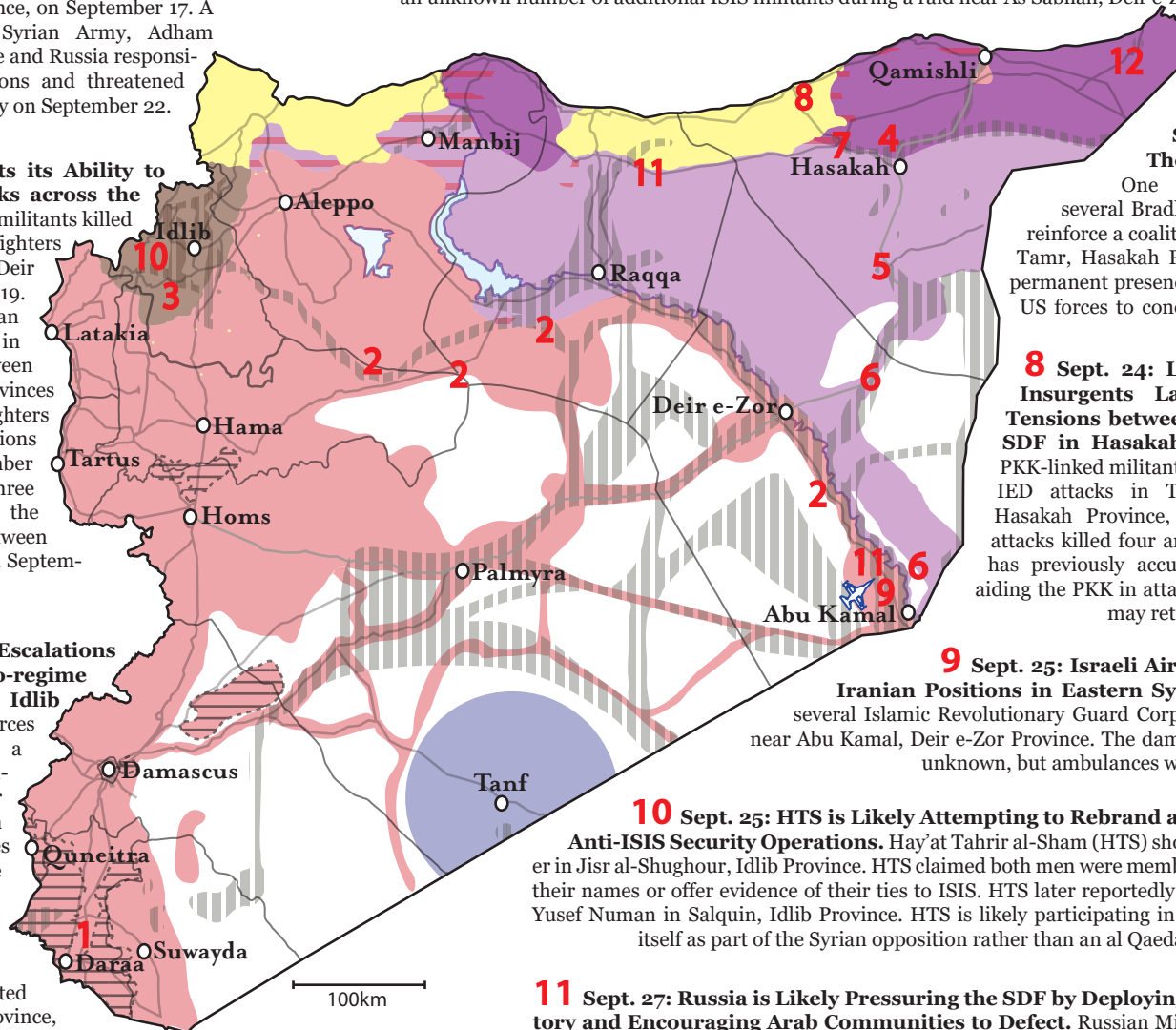
8 Sept. 24: Likely ISIS or PKK-linked Insurgents Launch Attacks to Stoke Tensions between Turkish Forces and the SDF in Hasakah Province. Likely ISIS or PKK-linked militants conducted two vehicle-borne IED attacks in Turkish-controlled Tal Halaf, Hasakah Province, on September 24. The two attacks killed four and wounded 12 others. Turkey has previously accused elements of the SDF of aiding the PKK in attacks against Turkish forces and may retaliate if those attacks continue.

9 Sept. 25: Israeli Airstrikes Continue to Target Iranian Positions in Eastern Syria. Israeli airstrikes targeted several Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iranian proxy positions near Abu Kamal, Deir e-Zor Province. The damage caused by the airstrikes is unknown, but ambulances were seen traveling to the scene.

10 Sept. 25: HTS is Likely Attempting to Rebrand as Moderate by Conducting Anti-ISIS Security Operations. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) shot one man and arrested another in Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province. HTS claimed both men were members of ISIS but did not disclose their names or offer evidence of their ties to ISIS. HTS later reportedly killed senior ISIS commander Yusef Numan in Salquin, Idlib Province. HTS is likely participating in anti-ISIS operations to brand itself as part of the Syrian opposition rather than an al Qaeda-linked terrorist organization.

11 Sept. 27: Russia is Likely Pressuring the SDF by Deploying Troops Close to its Territory and Encouraging Arab Communities to Defect. Russian Military Police established a new base in Al-Tarwazi, Raqqa Province after local Arab protesters forcibly expelled SDF fighters from the area. The Syrian Arab Army's Russian-backed 5th Corps also established multiple new positions along the Euphrates river across from SDF territory near Abu Kamal, Deir e-Zor Province.

12 Sept. 29: Russian Forces Attempt to Control a US Military Ground Line of Communication between Iraq and Syria. A Russian Military Police patrol forcibly broke through a barrier set up by US troops near al-Malikiyah, Hasakah Province. Local protesters in Borzi, Hasakah Province, prevented Russian forces from creating a checkpoint between US troops and the Iraqi border.



- Pro-Regime
- ISIS Support Zones
- Al Qaeda-Dominated*
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- SDF-Dominated, Regime Presence
- Turkey-Opposition
- Core SDF-Held Kurdish Terrain
- US and Partner Forces
- Former Opposition Terrain (Reconciled)
- Israeli Airstrikes

*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 September 29, 2020

Key Takeaway: Pro-regime actors may be preparing for an offensive in Greater Idlib Province. Russia and the regime have recently increased their bombardment and infiltration attempts in the Jabal Zawiya and Sahl al-Ghab areas. Russia is diplomatically pressuring Turkey to fulfill its commitments to counterterrorism likely to justify a pro-regime offensive against areas primarily controlled by al Qaeda-aligned factions if Turkey does not conduct operations against these groups. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, an al Qaeda-linked faction, is likely attempting to brand itself as moderate by conducting anti-ISIS operations to weaken the Russian narrative that terrorist organizations control Idlib Province and potentially to secure the support of Turkey in repelling a pro-regime offensive.

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