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 passed 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 regime

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 and has repeatedly struck Iranian targets in Iran's 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 Siddiqi (AABS) claimed responsibility for a roadside improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a Turkish military convoy near the town of Ma'arat Misreen, 10 km north of Idlib City, on February 24. AABS attacked a Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) armored 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 Balsaraya village, 3 km east of the Turkish-Syrian border. Jir al Shugor, Idlib Province, on March 15. AABS, a small and relatively obscure al Qaeda affiliate operating in Idlib, claimed responsibility for an attack against a road leading to any other Salafi-jihadist factions, and it actively opposes the Turkish presence in the region. HTS has recently attempted to crack down on rival jihadist groups operating in Idlib Province, most notably Hurras al-Deen, while HTS attempts to preserve its ideological advantage.

4. Feb. 25: US airstrike targets Iranian proxies Kataba Bezbah (KH) and Kataba Bezbah 2 in Quneitra (KSS) in Abu Kamal, Deir-ez-Zor Province, in retaliation for rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq. The airstrike destroyed 11 Iranian-held facilities and three vehicles transporting Iranian-made rockets from the KH-2 artillery base near the town of Al-Raqqah, to the SDF-controlled town of Azaz. Turkey has expressed concerns about the use of Iranian-made missiles in an 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 airstrike targets regime and Iran-backed militia sites in Damascus. Israeli aircraft launched several strikes targeting the regime's 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 near the Khabir Military Airport and two Iranian-backed militia military bases in the 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 Kuwaiti Airbase targeting critical energy infrastructure in Turkish-controlled Syria. Pro-regime forces, likely with Russian support, conducted coordinated missile strikes with surface-to-surface and cruise missiles targeting Tartim (Tadmur district), to deconflict with Russia.

7. Mar. 8: SDF supports defeated Gen. Manaf Taha and the SDF Council (TMG) aka Assad's military council in Tel Bachar, a joint military council created by the regime's allies to defend Tel Bachar. The SDF Council has been active in defending the town.

8. Mar. 11: Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Qatar conduct first trilateral Syria meeting in Doha, Qatar. The foreign ministers of the three states reportedly discussed the Astana format. Turkey will host the next trilateral meeting between the three states. The countries emphasized the importance of Turkey's role in the process. The SDF claims increased the regime's willingness to negotiate with the regime.

9. Mar. 14: IS claims attacks on government forces in Dara'a. An ISIS militant shot an SAA officer in the town of Jabaliya, Dara'a Province, but did not kill anyone. The SAA officer was shot in the leg and is recovering.

10. 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 Sabratha, Idlib Province, and the Bab Al-Hawa crossing near the Syrian-Turkish border. Meanwhile, unidentified regime forces launched rockets at the Al Maghara Hospital on the outskirts of Al-Bab, Aleppo Province, on March 21. The Russian Ministry of Defense released a video showing rockets launched against a Turkish military convoy.

11. Mar. 22: Russian and pro-regime forces target civilian infrastructure and transit routes near the Syrian-Iraqi border in northern Idlib. Russian Air Force aircraft struck a cement factory, a gas plant, and a commercial truck depot between the town of Sabratha, Idlib Province, and the Bab Al-Hawa crossing near the Syrian-Turkish border. Meanwhile, unidentified regime forces launched rockets at the Al Maghara Hospital on the outskirts of Al-Bab, Aleppo Province, on March 21. The Russian Ministry of Defense released a video showing rockets launched against a Turkish military convoy.