Syria Situation Report: September 2 - 15, 2020

1 Sept. 3 - 14: Israeli Airstrikes Continue to Disrupt Iranian-backed Forces in Syria. Several Israeli airstrikes killed at least 16 Iranian-backed militia members near al-Mayadin and Abu Kamal, Deir e-Zor Province, on September 3. Israeli airstrike severely damaged the al-Safirah military complex, known for its production and storage of ballistic missiles and chemical weapons, in Aleppo Province on September 11. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps reportedly supplies Lebanese Hezbollah with missiles manufactured at these laboratories. Six Israeli airstrike killed 10 Iranian-backed militia members and destroyed ammunition depots and vehicles near Abu Kamal, Deir e-Zor Province, on September 14.

2 Sept. 7: Assad Seeks Russian Help to Support Failing Economy and Begin Reconstruction. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Damascus. The group agreed to strengthen bilateral ties, continue the fight against terrorism, and address the negative consequences of the war through reconstruction in Syria.

3 Sept. 7: ISIS Demonstrates Growing Strength in the Central Syrian Desert. ISIS militants clashed with the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces, briefly taking control of Douayat gas field, 14 km south of al-Sukhnah, Homs Province. SAA and Russian forces regained control of Douayat gas field later that day.

4 Sept. 8: Local Arab Tribe Members Expel SDF through Violent Action. Local members of the Arab Aqidat tribe captured and expelled Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters following clashes in Jadid Aqidat, Deir e-Zor Province. Clashes occurred after the SDF sent reinforcements to the town possibly to arrest a number of local residents.

5 Sept. 10: Baghouz Coordination Committee Presents the SDF With a List of Demands and Threats. The Baghouz Coordination Committee demanded that the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria give an official apology for the current political and security situation in the area, improve living conditions, stop random arrests and military rule, release Baghouz natives being held in displacement camps, and allow for aid organizations to enter the town. The Committee threatened to launch general civil disobedience and close all government departments if their demands are not met within 10 days.

6 Sept. 10: IRGC Encourages Arab Tribal Defections and Threatens SDF Presence in Deir e-Zor Province. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) established a new military post on the Deir e-Zor-Hasakah road east of the Euphrates River. The IRGC is likely attempting to encourage Arab defection from the SDF by establishing a presence on the eastern side of the Euphrates River. Additional IRGC bases along the Deir e-Zor-Hasakah road could threaten the transit of SDF members.

7 Sept. 10 - 15: ISIS Continues Campaign of Assassinations against Syrian Regime Operatives to Increase Freedom of Movement and Foment Unrest in Daraa Province. Suspected ISIS assassinated Brigadier General Talal Qassem of the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) Russian-backed 5th Corps, two members of the SAA's Iranian-backed 4th Division, Muhammad Jamal al-Jalam of the Russian-backed Daraa Central Committee, and Muhammad Qasim al-Yunis - an Iranian militia recruiter in Daraa Province, on September 10. The SAA's Russian-backed 5th Corps clashed with armed Bedouin tribes near al-Ghariya al-Shargiya and al-Soura, Daraa Province. Two members of the 8th Brigade and one Bedouin were killed.

8 Sept. 13: Clashes with Local Population Threaten to Undermine the Image of the 8th Brigade in Daraa Province. The SAA's Russian-backed 5th Corps clash with armed Bedouin tribes near al-Ghariya al-Shargiya and al-Soura, Daraa Province. Two members of the 8th Brigade and one Bedouin were killed.

9 Sept. 14: Continued US Drone Strikes Targeting HaD Leadership Will Likely Enable HTS to Exercise Greater Control over Idlib Province. Hurras al-Din (HaD) Commanders Sayyaf al-Tunisi and Abu Hamza al-Yamani were killed in a likely US drone strike in Idlib City. Sayyaf al-Tunisi and Abu Hamza al-Yamani were reportedly hostile to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. HTS and HaD are rival Salafi-jihadist organizations operating in Idlib Province. HTS has recently cooperated with Turkey to stabilize the region while HaD has sought to undermine these efforts.

Key Takeaway: ISIS is continuing to reconstitute in Syria amidst increased unrest and popular opposition to local security forces. Suspected ISIS assassinations demonstrated the group’s increased capabilities by carrying out a campaign of assassinations targeting pro-regime operatives in Daraa Province. ISIS will likely continue to rapidly reconstitute in southern Syria if fighting between pro-regime forces and armed local populations persists. Separately, ISIS is expanding its influence in eastern Syria following increased pressure on the Syrian Democratic Forces from local Arab tribes and pro-regime actors. ISIS will seek to foment additional unrest in order to further increase its freedom of action in southern and central Syria.

©2020 by the Institute for the Study of War