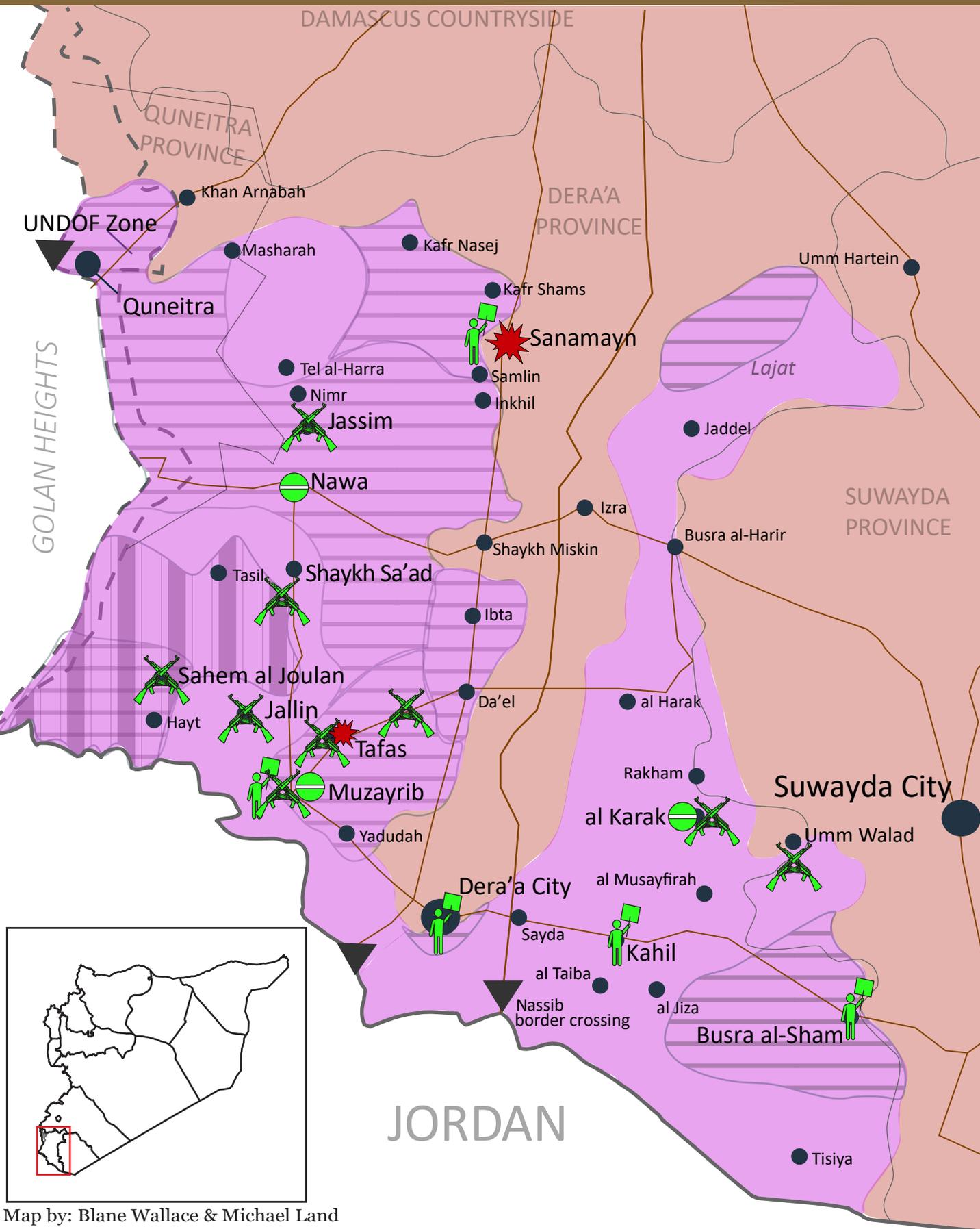


March 1 Attacks on Pro-Regime Positions Demonstrate Growing Strength of Southern Syria Insurgency



Key Takeaway: The armed anti-Assad insurgency* in southern Syria demonstrated its growing strength on March 1 by seizing several positions held by pro-Assad forces in Dera'a Province in reaction to a large pro-regime security operation in the north of the province. The scope and scale of the insurgent attacks represent a new threshold for the southern insurgency. The anti-Assad attack coincided with large local protests against both the pro-regime forces' security operations and the ongoing Russian-led pro-regime offensive in Idlib Province. The timing of the flare-up in Dera'a demonstrates that the anti-Assad insurgency in southwest Syria seeks to link its struggle with the crisis in Idlib. The anti-Assad insurgency in Dera'a could further metastasize as Assad continues to prioritize the Idlib offensive, which is deepening the security gap in southern Syria. The Assad regime and its allies will likely struggle to quell the insurgency, which has already grown in breadth, coordination, and effectiveness.

KEY

Pro-Assad Forces' Assault: Pro-Assad forces attempted to storm the town of Sanamayn in northern Dera'a Province on the morning of March 1. The town has long been a hotbed of insurgent and anti-Assad activity. Pro-regime forces deployed armored units, reportedly including tanks, to subdue insurgent and former opposition groups in Sanamayn. The attack represents a significant escalation from previous pro-regime security operations in the area. The regime reportedly reached a temporary ceasefire with representatives in Sanamayn, although clashes continued into March 2. Pro-regime forces also attempted to storm the town of Tafas in southwestern Dera'a Province later on March 2. However, anti-Assad actors in the city reportedly repelled the pro-regime forces' attempts and seized a pro-regime position near the town.

Ambush Targeting Pro-Assad Regime Forces: Anti-Assad actors seized pro-regime checkpoints in the towns of Tafas, Sahem al Joulan, Karak, and Jallin and fired on checkpoints near the towns of Sheikh Sa'ad, Umm Walad, and Jassim. Anti-Assad actors seized the checkpoints at the entrances to the town of Muzayrib and took control of a government building in the town. It is unclear which, if any, of the seized positions remain under the control of anti-Assad groups at the time of publication. It is uncommon for insurgent groups in the south to hold seized positions for long periods of time, even without pro-regime forces actively contesting control.

Protest against Assad Regime: Demonstrators gathered in several locations of Dera'a to protest the attempt by pro-regime forces to storm Sanamayn as well as the ongoing Russian-led regime offensive in Idlib Province. Protests took place in Sanamayn, Muzayrib, Kahil, Busra al Sham, and the Dera'a al Balad neighborhood of Dera'a City. The protest in Dera'a al Balad took place near the Omari Mosque, a frequent site of anti-regime protests in the city.

Roadblock Targeting Pro-Regime Forces: Anti-Assad actors and protesters burned tires to block roads in reaction to the pro-regime operation in Sanamayn. These roadblocks occurred in Nawa, in Karak, and around Muzayrib.

**ISW assesses with low confidence that the anti-Assad insurgency in southwest Syria includes a mix of former Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters, extremists linked to al Qaeda-affiliated groups, and ISIS members.*

- Russia-Iran-Assad
- Former Opposition-held (pre-May 2018)
- Reconciled Area
- Former ISIS-held (pre-July 2018)
- Major Roadway
- Provincial Border
- Town
- Provincial Capital
- Border Crossing