

Syria Situation Report: February 16 - 24, 2017

1 February 20 - 21: IS Affiliate Launches Offensive in Southern Syria: Islamic State affiliate Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Walid launched an offensive against opposition forces in the Yarmouk Basin in Daraa Province, seizing the towns of Tasil, Adwan, and Sahem al-Golan with the help of internal sleeper cells. The gains mirror a similar offensive conducted by the group in March 2016.

2 February 18 - 21: Pro-Regime Forces Begin Shelling Opposition-Held Districts of Damascus: Pro-regime forces conducted heavy airstrikes and artillery shelling targeting the besieged opposition-held Barzeh, Qaboun, and Tishreen Districts of Damascus, killing at least eighteen civilians and breaking a long-standing local ceasefire agreement that began in July 2014. The three neighborhoods serve as a key transit route for smuggling tunnels that provide weapons and supplies to the besieged Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus.

3 February 22: Israeli Airstrikes Target Pro-Regime Sites Near Damascus: The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) reportedly conducted up to six airstrikes targeting a pro-regime arms depot near Qutayfah in the Western Qalamoun Mountains on the Syrian-Lebanese Border. Activists claimed that the strike targeted a convoy carrying weapons for Lebanese Hezbollah.

4 February 20: Opposition Groups Evacuate Town on Syrian-Lebanese Border in Reconciliation Deal: Roughly two to four hundred opposition fighters and their families left the town of Serghaya in the Qalamoun Mountains on the Syrian-Lebanese Border for Idlib Province following the conclusion of a reconciliation deal brokered by Russia. The agreement calls for the regime to end its siege of the town, release local detainees, and grant a six-month period for defectors and draft-dodgers to normalize their status under a new local security force.

5 February 20: Roadside IED Kills Four Russian Soldiers in Homs Province: The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that a roadside improvised explosive device struck a pro-regime convoy last week on the highway between Homs City and T4 (Tiyas) Airbase in Eastern Homs Province, killing four Russian Armed Forces advisors. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the blast.

6 February 19 - 21: Pro-Regime Shi'a Militia Blocks UN Aid Convoys to Besieged District of Homs City: Fighters from the pro-regime Quwat al-Ridha paramilitary group blocked aid convoys from the UN and Syrian Red Crescent from entering the besieged opposition-held Wa'er District of Homs City for three consecutive days. The militia allegedly kidnapped at least two truck drivers and unloaded the contents of their vehicles in the Shi'a village of Mazra'ah west of Homs City.

7 February 18 - 21: Alleged IS Affiliate in Northern Hama Province Evacuates to IS-Held Eastern Hama Province: Liwa al-Aqsa - a splinter faction of Salafi-Jihadist group Jund al-Aqsa - evacuated roughly six hundred fighters and their families from Northern Hama Province and Southern Idlib Province to terrain held by IS in Eastern Hama Province following two weeks of clashes. The evacuations occurred as part of a deal negotiated between Liwa al-Aqsa and Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) with the mediation of the Turkistan Islamic Party.

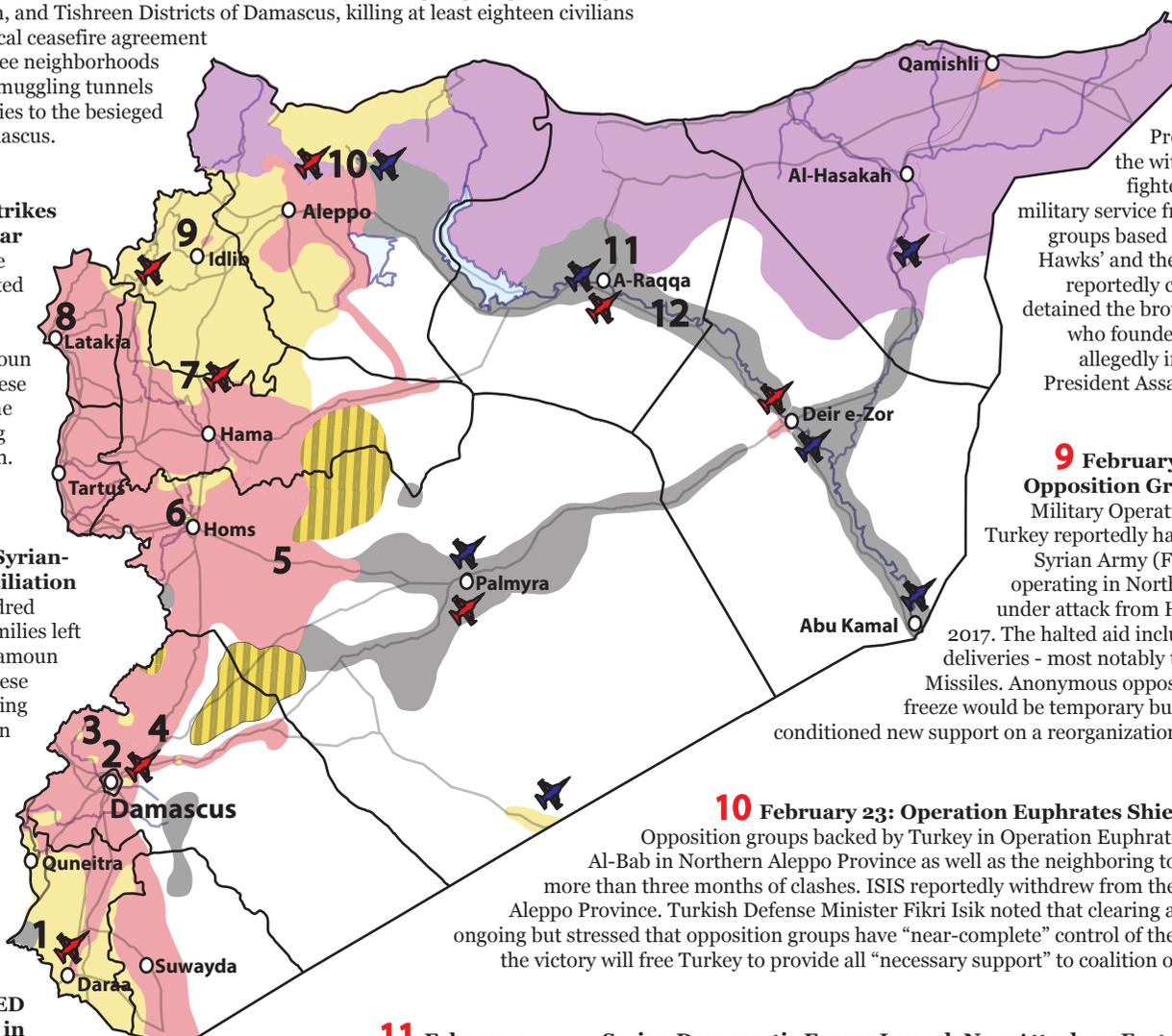
8 February 21: Regime Recalls Soldiers Embedded in Prominent Pro-Regime Militia: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ordered the withdrawal of nearly nine hundred fighters performing their compulsory military service from two prominent paramilitary groups based in Latakia Province - the 'Desert Hawks' and the 'Naval Commandos'. The order reportedly came after regime security forces detained the brother of the wealthy businessmen who founded the two groups after his forces allegedly interfered with a convoy carrying President Assad in Latakia City on February 6.

9 February 21: U.S. CIA Freezes Aid to Opposition Groups in Northern Syria: The Military Operations Command (MOM) based in Turkey reportedly halted all covert assistance to Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated opposition groups operating in Northern Syria after the groups came under attack from Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham in January 2017. The halted aid includes salaries, training, and arms deliveries - most notably the provision of TOW Anti-Tank Missiles. Anonymous opposition forces claimed that the aid freeze would be temporary but noted that several donor states conditioned new support on a reorganization into a unified opposition force.

10 February 23: Operation Euphrates Shield Seizes Al-Bab From ISIS: Opposition groups backed by Turkey in Operation Euphrates Shield seized full control over Al-Bab in Northern Aleppo Province as well as the neighboring towns of Bzaah and Qabasin after more than three months of clashes. ISIS reportedly withdrew from the city to nearby towns in Eastern Aleppo Province. Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik noted that clearing and demining operations remain ongoing but stressed that opposition groups have "near-complete" control of the city center. Isik reaffirmed that the victory will free Turkey to provide all "necessary support" to coalition operations to seize A-Raqqa City.

11 February 17 - 21: Syrian Democratic Forces Launch New Attack on Eastern Axis of A-Raqqa City: On February 17, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Deir ez-Zor Military Council (DMC) announced the start of a new stage of operations in the third phase of Operation Euphrates Wrath to isolate A-Raqqa City. The SDF subsequently launched a two-pronged offensive in Eastern A-Raqqa Province and Northern Deir e-Zor Province advancing towards the highway connecting the two provinces. The SDF later claimed to sever the main ground line of communication between A-Raqqa City and Deir e-Zor City on the northern bank of the Euphrates River on February 21.

12 February 18 - 22: Turkey Offers Two Proposals for Offensive on A-Raqqa City: Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik stated that Turkey presented U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford with alternative proposals for an offensive against IS in A-Raqqa City that excludes the Syrian Kurdish YPG during their meeting at Incirlik Airbase on February 18. The preferred alternative calls for the insertion of opposition groups backed by Turkey into Tel Abyad in Northern A-Raqqa Province in order to advance against A-Raqqa City via a twelve-mile-wide corridor through terrain currently held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The second proposal calls for opposition groups in Operation Euphrates Shield to advance more than one hundred miles from Northern Aleppo Province to Western A-Raqqa Province. Meanwhile, U.S. CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel stated on February 22 that the U.S. may need to deploy additional forces including artillery to Northern Syria in order to "maintain momentum" against IS in A-Raqqa City.



Areas of Control*

- Pro-Regime Forces
- Opposition Forces
- The Islamic State
- Kurdish Forces
- Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham
*Formerly Jabhat al-Nusra

Airstrikes

- ✈ Pro-Regime
- ✈ U.S. / Coalition



*Control of Terrain Accurate as of 16 FEB 2017