

Syria Situation Report: December 16, 2020 - January 7, 2021

1 Dec. 16 – Jan. 5: Iranian- and Russian-backed forces engage in mutual reinforcement in Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zour Province, as Russia tries to increasingly assert influence in historically Iranian-dominated areas. Russia reinforced its positions near Abu Kamal with 300 personnel and armored vehicles on December 16. Iran brought 150 militia members and heavy machinery to Abu Kamal on December 18. Russian forces established a new base at a soccer stadium in the Abu Kamal city center on January 5 and deployed additional armored vehicles to the position.

2 Dec. 16 – Jan. 7: Turkey continues shelling and attempts to seize SDF-held villages near Ayn Issa, Raqqa Province, while escalating kinetically across the frontline in Aleppo, Raqqa, and Hasakah Provinces, stoking tensions with Russia as well as the SDF. While Turkey has not yet mounted a full-scale offensive on Ayn Issa, continuous kinetic activity has disrupted civilian life, with more than half the town's population of 14,000 fleeing the area. SDF attention is acutely focused on resisting Turkish advances. Russia has responded to Turkish activity by establishing additional military positions near Ayn Issa and reinforcing existing positions. Turkish artillery landed on the perimeter of a Russian base on January 6, increasing the likelihood of Russo-Turkish escalation.

3 Dec. 20: ISIS claims its first attack in Afrin, Aleppo Province since 2017, demonstrating expanding area of operations. The attack consisted of an improvised explosive device (IED) planted in a vehicle belonging to the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army in Maatabli, Afrin District. ISIS only began claiming attacks in nearby Turkish-controlled towns al-Bab and Azaz in June 2020. ISIS attack capabilities in Afrin are notable as ISIS did not control Afrin even at the height of its power, in contrast with al-Bab and Azaz. ISW previously assessed that either ISIS or the PKK may have been responsible for IED attacks in Afrin throughout November and December 2020; while it is still unclear whether ISIS or the PKK was responsible for each event, this ISIS claim lends further credence to the possibility that ISIS perpetrated some of the attacks.

4 Dec. 22: US Treasury Department imposes sanctions on Asma al-Assad and Syria's Central Bank. Several other Syrian persons and entities with ties to the Assad regime were also sanctioned. Sanctions were authorized under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019.

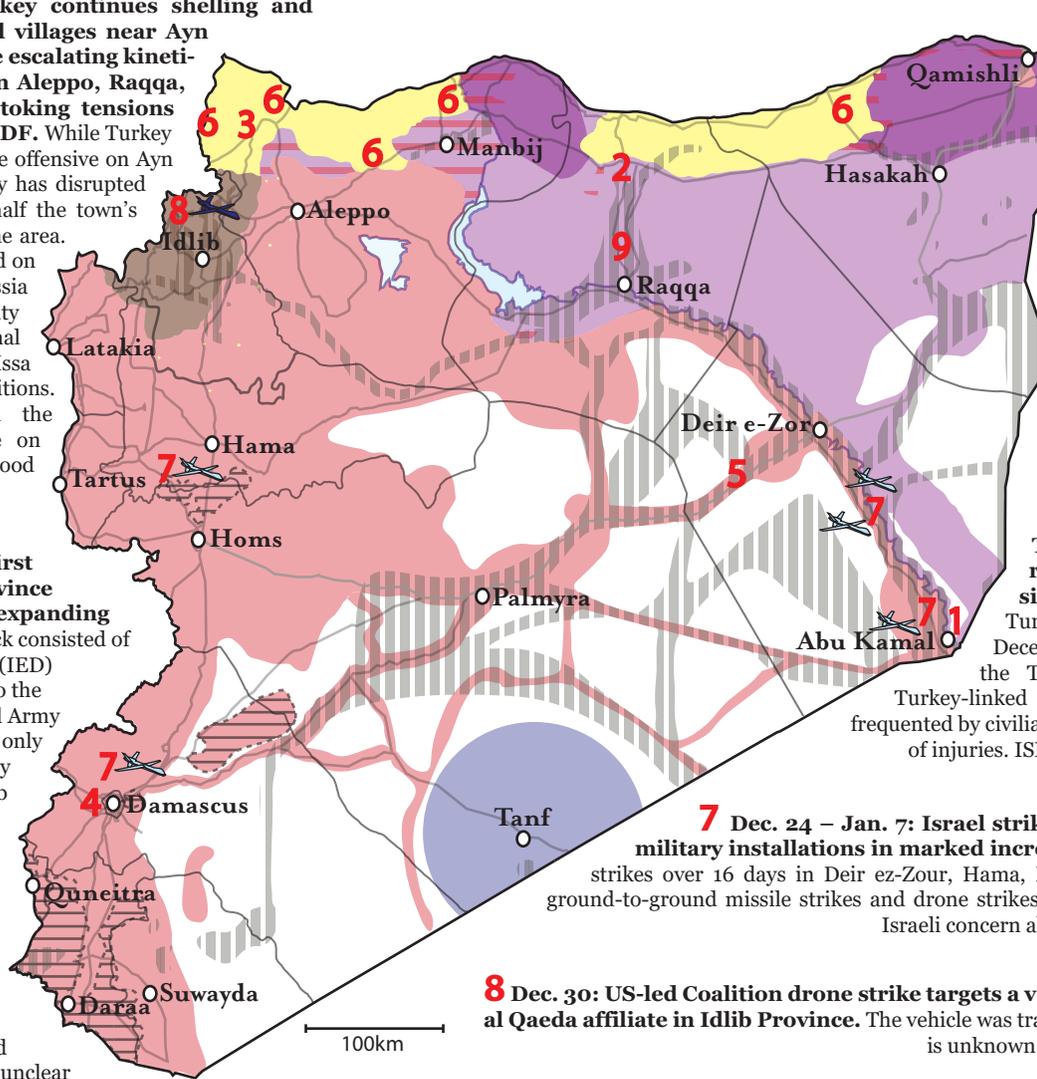
5 Dec. 24 – 30: ISIS ambushes regime units in two large-scale attacks that threaten regime ground lines of communication along the Deir ez-Zour City-Palmyra highway. ISIS attacked a bus carrying SAA 4th Division soldiers with an IED and automatic weapons fire near al Shula, Deir ez-Zour Province, on December 24, producing an unreported number of casualties. ISIS attacked another bus carrying SAA 4th Division and SAA 17th Division soldiers with IEDs and automatic weapons fire near Kobajjep, Deir ez-Zour Province, killing at least 30 pro-regime fighters. ISIS ambushes along the Deir ez-Zour City-Palmyra highway are not a new phenomenon, but have grown more spectacular and increasingly threaten the regime's ability to transport personnel for participation in counter-ISIS operations.

6 Dec. 24 – Jan. 6: Uptick in IED attacks in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria likely represents PKK response to Turkish aggression in northern Syria. Seven IEDs detonated in Turkish-held Aleppo and Hasakah Provinces between December 24 and January 6. Most of the attacks targeted the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army or other Turkey-linked security forces but took place in venues also frequented by civilians. They resulted in at least eight deaths and dozens of injuries. ISIS may also be responsible for some of these attacks.

7 Dec. 24 – Jan. 7: Israel strikes Iranian and Assad regime personnel and military installations in marked increase in operational tempo. Israel carried out six strikes over 16 days in Deir ez-Zour, Hama, Rif Damascus, and Suwayda provinces, including ground-to-ground missile strikes and drone strikes. The increase in attacks likely represents growing Israeli concern about the entrenchment of Iranian influence in Syria.

8 Dec. 30: US-led Coalition drone strike targets a vehicle likely belonging to the leadership of an al Qaeda affiliate in Idlib Province. The vehicle was traveling between Salqin and Isqat. The casualty count is unknown. The United States has not acknowledged the strike.

9 Dec. 31: Al Qaeda-affiliate Hurras al-Din claims its first attack outside northwest Syria, assaulting a Russian base in Tal al-Samn, Raqqa Province. The Hurras al-Din militants employed both small arms fire and a car bomb. Several Russian soldiers were injured in the attack. This event marks an inflection—no Hurras al-Din activity has previously been observed in Raqqa Province but the Hurras al-Din claim appears valid. Al Qaeda affiliated groups likely retain latent networks throughout Syria; such a network may have been responsible for this attack. The attack may also have been perpetrated by a former ISIS cell that defected to Hurras al-Din.



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

*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 January 10, 2020

Key Takeaway: Salafi-jihadist organizations in Syria are growing more ambitious. Both ISIS and Hurras al-Din have recently carried out attacks in Turkish-controlled areas in which they had not previously been active. While these attacks were fairly ineffective, they demonstrate intent and capacity to expand operations. Meanwhile, ISIS carried out two ambushes of regime forces in Deir ez-Zour Province that resulted in dozens of casualties. ISIS and Hurras al-Din are well postured to exploit security gaps in both Turkish- and regime-controlled areas and will likely do so in the coming year.



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